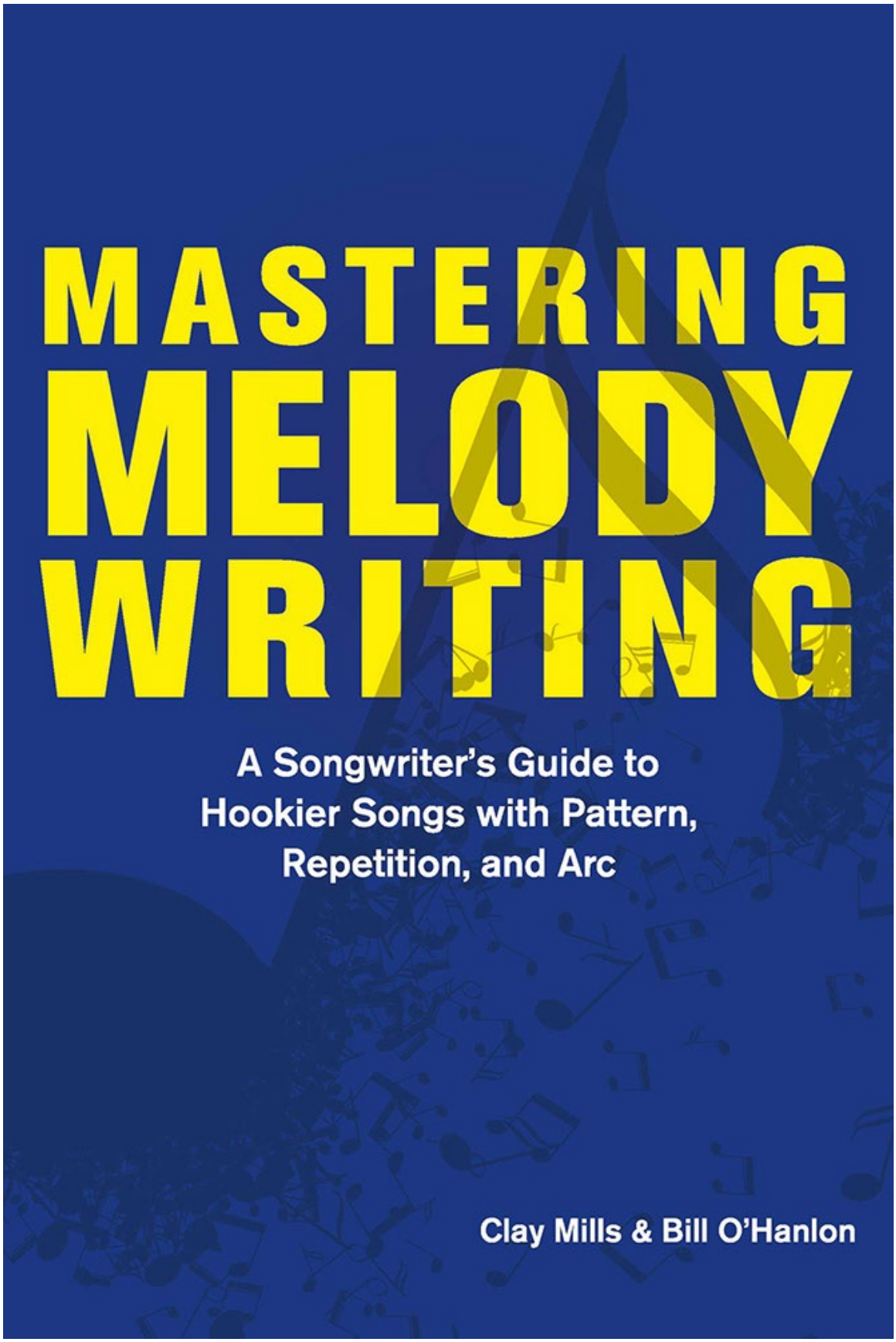
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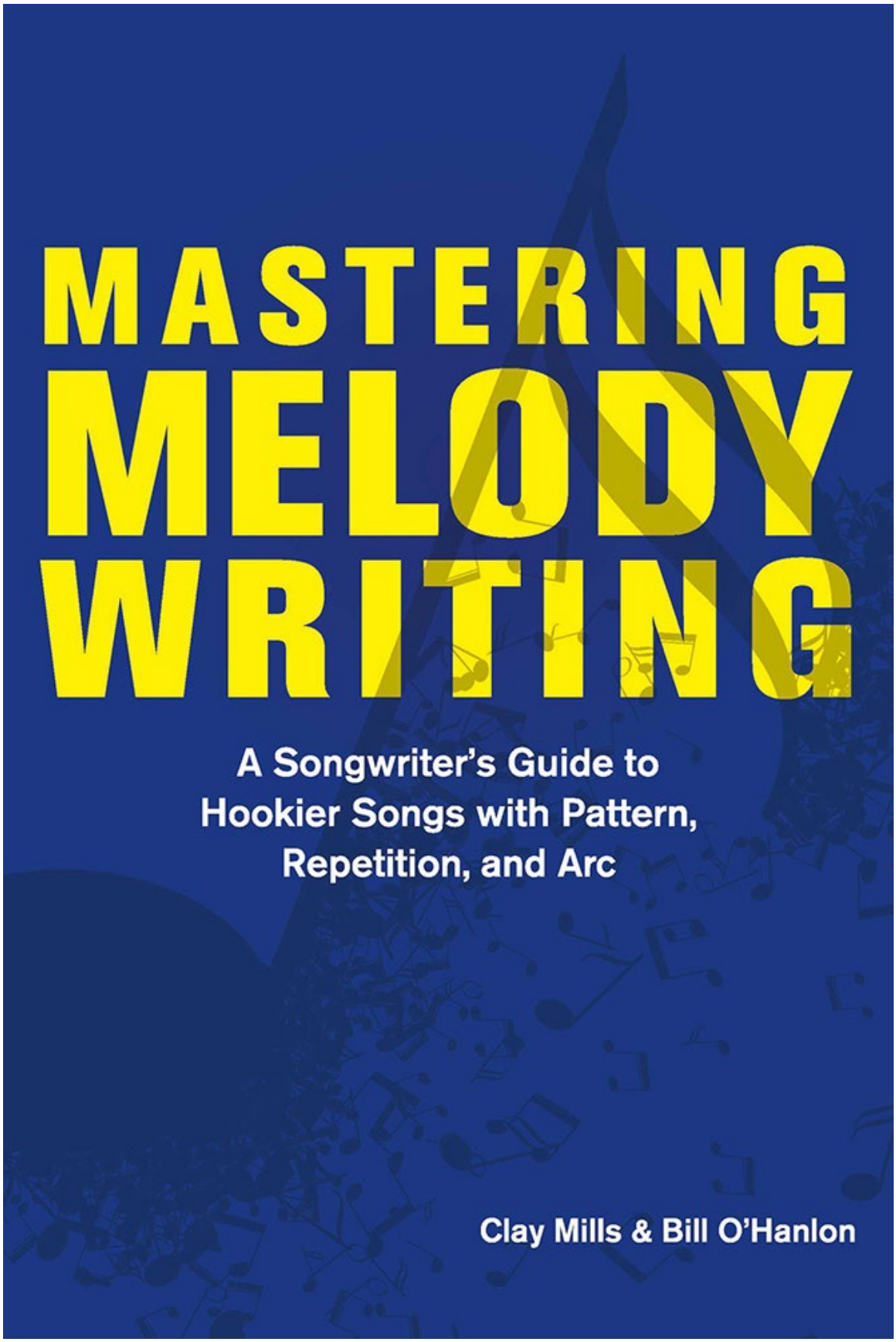
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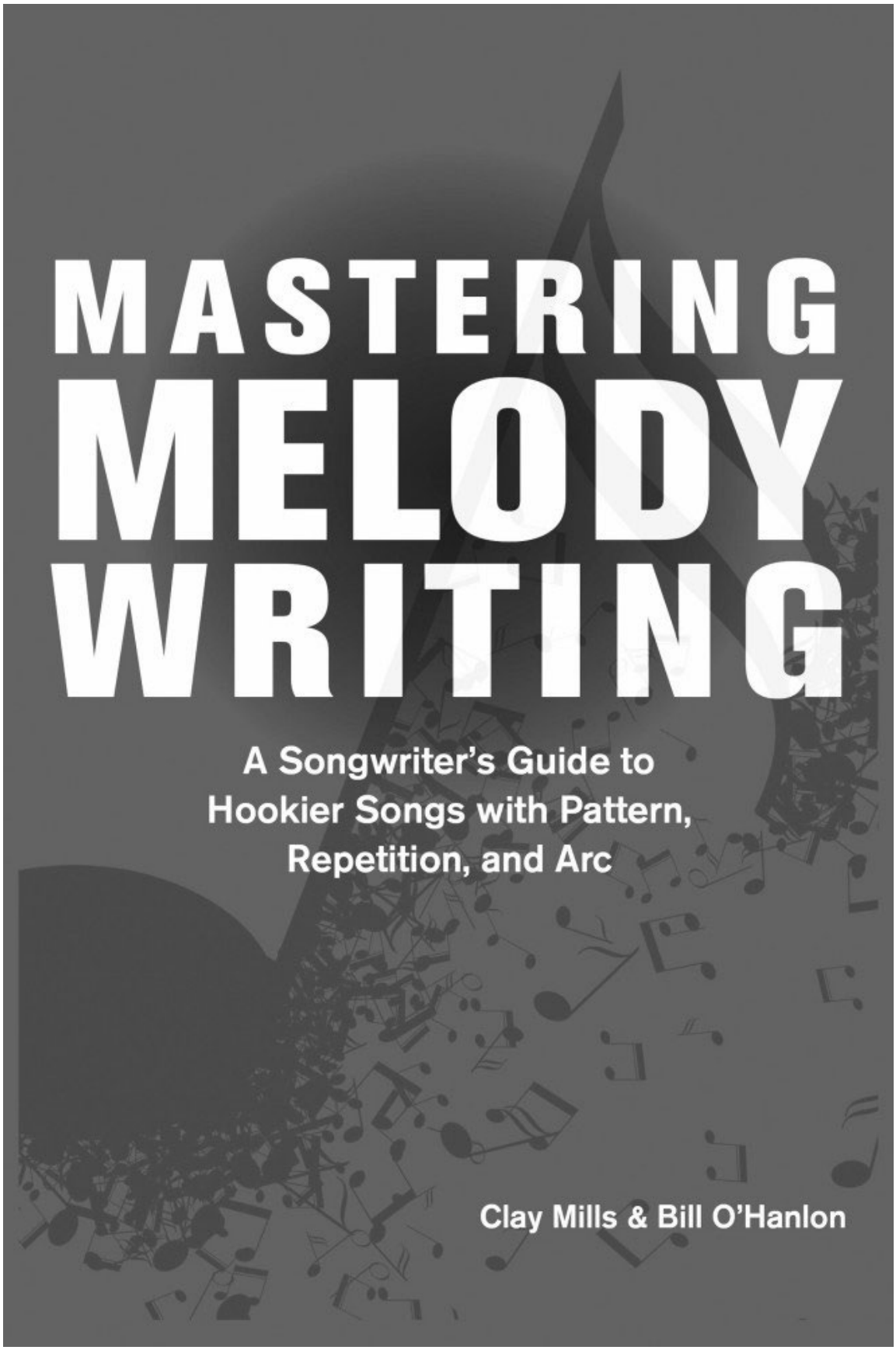
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Mastering Melody Writing: A Songwriter’s Guide To Hookier Songs With Pattern, Repetition, and Arc

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Dedication

From Clay:

To my beautiful wife Karen, thank you for your continued love, support, and your world-class editing skills on Mastering Melody Writing.

To my creative son Garrett, who continues to inspire me with his artistic eye and courage.

To my mom Elizabeth, you were always there encouraging my big dreams in a small town.

To Bill, my co-author and friend, your creativity and positive energy kept this book flowing.

To all my many collaborators over the years, it's been a blast to hang out and create some music history of our own. Let's keep it going!

To Marty Dodson, who thought co-founding a world-wide songwriting community with me was a great idea. SongTown rocks.

From Bill:

To Helen, for being the song I know all the words to.

To my co-writers, who continue to teach me so much about writing songs and better melodies.

To Clay, for moving my melody writing and editing up several notches.

To my other pro mentors in songwriting: Beth Nielsen Chapman, Gary Burr, Georgia Middleman, Marty Dodson, and Tom Douglas.

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Foreword

A Great Song Takes You Anywhere!

When I was seven years old, I stood watching my uncle's band rehearse in a small farmhouse in the Mississippi Delta. This is my first memory of live music. I would hang for hours watching them rehearse, soaking in the magic of guitar strings, drums, and harmony vocals. I was transported to a new, exciting world. From that first note, I wanted to create my own music. I had no idea how to do it, nor did I have any idea that one day I would write songs for hit recording artists.

That's the real power of a song. It took a wide-eyed kid out of small-town Mississippi into writing rooms and recording studios all around the world. Song power lit the ideas in my head and heart until they found their way to multi-platinum records, radio airways, and stadium stages.

You see, songs don't care whether you are rich or broke. They don't care if you were born into the music business, either. Great songs travel. And, great melodies get sung or hummed, despite language barriers, circling the globe in a world all their own.

At 19, I officially started my musical journey with a grand total of $300 in my pocket, a friend who offered me a sofa for a month in New York City, and a desire to follow my crazy dreams. Today, I am fortunate enough to be a multi-platinum songwriter and producer having penned #1 hits for Darius Rucker ("Don't Think I Don't Think About It"), Diamond Rio ("Beautiful Mess"), and Kimberley Locke ("Fall"). Along the way, I've collected Grammy nominations

for “Beautiful Mess” and Trisha Yearwood’s “Heaven, Heartache, and the Power of Love.”

Hundreds of my songs have been recorded by major artists spanning the genres of pop, dance, rock, country, bluegrass, and gospel. A few artists who have recorded my songs include: Lady A, Baby Face, Little Big Town, Reba McEntire, Easton Corbin, Clay Walker, Andy Griggs, and many others. Some of my favorite hits include Darius Rucker’s “History In The Making” and “I Got Nothing.”

I tell you all of this for two reasons. First, I believe great songs open doors. And secondly, I believe it’s important when you are learning anything about making music or songwriting that you look to people who have a track record of accomplishments and success. I believe we, as teachers of songwriting, should earn the right to show you a way forward, if you’re interested.

Moreover it’s important to not only find mentors who walk the walk, but who are equally adept at explaining the steps they take in their daily journey. In addition to working as a professional songwriter for many decades, I have a passion for teaching passed down to me from my parents, who spent their lives as educators and authors. I’ve taught and mentored thousands of aspiring songwriters over the past eight years through SongTown, an online community I co-founded in 2012.

So, I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about what I do. The elements laid out in this book are not only proven to work in the real world, but also have helped many of my students achieve big results in their songwriting journeys.

Write on!

Clay Mills

About My Co-Author

Bill O'Hanlon is an aspiring professional songwriter. Bill has written or co-written 38 previous books, so we've decided to join forces to write this book. Bill's book publishing credits include: Do One Thing Different, which landed him in the chair across from Oprah, The Songwriter's Guide To Mastering Co-Writing, co-written with me and my SongTown co-founder, hit Nashville songwriter Marty Dodson, and Song Building, co-written with Marty Dodson.

Bill brings writing and publishing expertise, as he plays the role of student/learner for you, the reader, making sure everything is clear for the beginner, intermediate, or advanced songwriter.

Introduction

Discovering The PRA Method

In my Melody MasterClasses, I teach melody to songwriters by coaching them how to make their melodies more memorable.

While explaining the what and how of writing hooky and timeless melodies, I created the PRA Method to conjure the intangible of melody-making into graspable parts.

Three key elements for writing memorable songs and melodies are encapsulated in the PRA Method:

Pattern

Repetition

Arc

Because each part builds upon the other, much like a beautiful melody, I think

it’s best to learn the PRA Method in this order.

In Chapter 1, we look at Melodic Patterns.

I like to think of it this way: a song’s melody consists of a series of melody notes arranged in rhythmic patterns.

In the Patterns section, you will learn to:

- Recognize patterns

- Write more memorable patterns

- Understand melody, rhythm, chords, and rhymes

In Chapter 2, we look at Repetition.

Repetition is the art of repeating melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic patterns in a memorable way. A successful song uses repeated patterns to engage the listener and leave a lasting impression.

In this section, you’ll learn to:

- Create symmetry between melody, chords, and rhythm

- Compose variant repeating patterns of melody, chords, and rhythm

- Recognize Hotspots

And, finally, in Chapter 3, we look at Arc.

The arc of a song is the rise and fall of the melodic story. I believe successful song melodies tell stories both separately and in conjunction with the lyrics of the song.

Melody tells a story through emotion and sound, rather than words.

In this section you will learn to:

- Arrange repeated patterns into a memorable song arc

- Build an emotional story from beginning to end

- Recognize the role of each song section.

Just as we are riveted by a well-told story, we should get hooked by well-told, well-written melodies. In Mastering Melody Writing I will demonstrate how to tell a good song story using the three elements of the PRA Method.

Inspired vs. Reactive Listening

Inspired Listening is a personal songwriting habit I developed in the early days of my own creative journey and a method I recommend to every aspiring songwriter.

Inspired Listening to songs means noticing what we like about a particular song and then analyzing which elements inspire or hook us. We can file these elements away and recall them later. The goal is to channel them into our own music. Inspired listening gives us the opportunity to grow.

Reactive Listening to songs is opinion-based and serves little purpose other than reinforcing what we already think we know about music. It often involves making negative and dismissive assessments. Too many times I have heard bitter or frustrated aspiring songwriters say, “I could write a better song than those songs I hear on the radio.” Or, “Every song on the radio sounds the same.” Or, “I hate today’s hip hop (or country or opera or classical or bluegrass…).” Reactive Listening rarely helps a songwriter improve.

Songs are ultimately a conversation between the writer, singer, and audience. So, part of becoming an accomplished songwriter is understanding your listeners. What do they find interesting about songs in a particular style? How are they emotionally connecting? Perhaps it’s the cool way the vocal plays off the guitar riff, or the way the song begins with the chorus instead of the verse, or maybe

it’s simply a beautiful series of notes. Spend some time being curious about what makes a popular song appeal to the listener’s ear—so much so that it got recorded and played over and over. Train yourself to listen with an inspired, appreciative, open attitude. Remember, the goal of Inspired Listening is to discover methods and techniques that you can file away to incorporate into your own yet-to-be-written songs.

I recommend searching for inspiration in every song you hear, and then, spending some time thinking, “What about this element appeals to me?” I am always listening for tools I can add to my own songwriting toolbox. Deliberately seek out genres of music you would “never” listen to and, again, find something about each song in that genre that works or makes it hooky and compelling. Try putting yourself in that audience’s seat.

I make it a regular practice to set aside time each week to just listen to new music. I encourage you to do the same. Soak in a variety of styles, sounds, and genres. Listening to music you came of age to is okay, but those songs are already embedded into your DNA. So, it’s especially beneficial to get outside your comfort zone.

Inspired Listening is the first step in a series of techniques included in Mastering Melody Writing to soak the ideas and methodology into your bones so your melodic storytelling comes alive.

The Songwriter as “Corporation You”

I once heard writer and musician John Mayer say each songwriter is like a corporation. Every time the songwriter learns some new method or skill, or picks up a trick from someone else’s writing, playing or singing, it’s akin to a corporation acquiring the assets of another company. You can file it away and

pull out the technique when it fits a future song. “Oh, I love how the melody went down in pitch for the chorus section. It really has a chill vibe. I’m going to try that in my next song.”

In Mastering Melody Writing, yes, I’m giving you tools I’ve used successfully. But, not only do I want to help you incorporate the PRA elements into your songwriting “corporation,” I hope to teach you how to recognize and acquire new ones for your own melodies.

You’ll soon be listening to songs and melodies differently and discovering your own distinctions, tools, and methods!

Turning Anything into a Melody: The Talk/Sing Method

Once, early in my songwriting career, I was driving to a co-writing session with Hall-of-Fame songwriter Rory Bourke. Traffic was extremely slow that day. I rushed into the writing room and frantically said, “I’m so sorry that I’m late.” Immediately, Rory sang what I had just said: “I’m so sorry… that I’m… late.” I chuckled, but when he continued to repeat little things I said throughout the co-writing session and at lunch that day, I got a little annoyed.

However, over the next few weeks, I found myself doing the same thing in everyday life. I’d hear an actor say something in a movie and immediately, without thinking, sing back the phrase. A friend would say something in conversation and I’d repeat it back with a melody. It was as if I had caught a melody disease!

Over time, I started to notice it was easier and easier to conjure new melodies

while songwriting. Singing what I or someone else was saying was teaching me how to turn phrases into melodies in a seamless way—in an instinctual way. I was shortening the distance between lyrical thought and the melody of a song, striking closer to the emotion of the words. Oh, and by the way, some of those phrases Rory sang back to me turned into great songs! I still do this exercise to this day. I owe Rory a big thanks for teaching me this valuable technique!

I encourage you to use this technique with phrases you hear on TV, on the radio, or in everyday situations. This will help train you to intuitively fit phrases into melody and rhythm. No thinking or filtering, just sing. For this melody muscle builder, remember there is no wrong way to sing a line. It's all about shortening the lag time between thinking words and breathing musical emotion into them. So, sing away!

Mastering Melody Writing Includes an Interactive Resource Website

Throughout this book, I will be referring to numerous musical examples that illustrate techniques you will be learning. Rather than have you chase down all the songs yourself, I've put together a resource website as a companion to this book. You'll find all the song examples I mention organized by chapters. I've also included some bonus lesson videos for you as well. Simply go to www.songtownpress.com and click on Mastering Melody Writing to access your resources.

I recommend keeping a blank notebook dedicated to Mastering Melody Writing for your Inspired Listening and for the "Put into Practice" exercises within this book. Creating your own companion workbook gives you an invaluable reference moving forward until these practices become second nature.

Glossary

I’ve included a short glossary at the back of this book of some terms, concepts, and methods I’ve developed over years of teaching. Also, you’ll find some inside lingo in the glossary that is used in pro writing rooms around the world.

Okay, now let’s get started learning the PRA Method so you can write better melodies.

Part 1

Creating Compelling and Memorable Songs

Chapter 1

Patterns

Section 1: Musical Patterns in Songwriting

I’ve had a lifelong love affair with songwriting and searching for timeless song devices—a quest to understand what makes great songs tick (and stick!). From classical to jazz to rock to rap, patterns are one of the core foundational devices that successful songs stand upon to create memorable melodies.

The brain loves patterns and gets hooked on them. Patterns help us make sense out of chaos. A short ride through the Disney theme park attraction “It’s a Small World” proves it—and, very possibly, might haunt you for days. So, be warned if you have never heard this catchy tune.

This basic appeal of pattern repetition is one of the melody writer’s most powerful tools for drawing in and hooking listeners. These three main musical elements get patterned in songs:

Melody/Notes

Rhythm

Chords

Melody Patterns

Melody patterns consist of a series of repeated notes that catch the listener's ear. Any sequence of repeated notes is a pattern. If the melodic sequence is executed only once and never repeated, the song becomes less interesting, less compelling, and less memorable.

To create melody patterns, the songwriter can play with the sequence of notes, intervals between notes, length of notes, and rhythm in which the notes are sung. Some notes are stretched out while other notes end quickly. As the songwriter, you might experiment placing space (or rests) between notes to compose patterns.

By combining lyrics with melodies, we have a few more variables to play with: rhymes, vowel and consonant sounds, and line lengths. In popular music, we typically have twelve available notes or tones to use in our songs. You'd think after thousands of years of songwriting we would have created all of the possible melody combinations, but clearly, we haven't. Newer songwriters can fall into the trap of hanging onto the first melodic pattern that comes to mind. However, this is not often the best possible melody for the song. Another rookie mistake is to use a hooky melody once, and then never repeat it in a chorus or verse.

Mastering Melody Writing gives you a lot of options for developing your initial melody, and then, rewriting techniques to make it better. Developing your melody muscles can make the difference between having a song that is just okay and a song that is memorable with wide commercial appeal.

Rhythmic Patterns

Rhythm is the second element to pattern in songs. Most likely, this was the first way we wrote songs in human history: we clapped, tapped, and stomped to create repeating rhythmic patterns.

Rhythm is a foundational element of melody. One way to look at rhythm is to talk about “beats” in music. The beat of the music is the way the notes are stressed. By clapping four times in a row, with each clap spaced evenly and at the same loudness, the songwriter introduces a rhythmic pattern. By clapping twice and allowing some space between the next two claps, a different rhythmic pattern or beat emerges. And, so on.

Combining sounds and silences makes up a song’s rhythm signature. The silence between sounds is called a rest, while tempo is the speed at which the notes or the rhythms are played in the song. When notes or tones are added to the rhythms, the foundation of a melody develops.

An infinite number of ways exists to pattern the rhythmic elements of a melody. You can vary the beat on which you start the melody. You can start on the first beat, the second, and so on—or even, in between beats. For example, if we count out the bar “one and two and three and four and,” the melody can start on the “and” of one. Any note can be emphasized on any of the beats. Putting the emphasis on the up-beats (the “ands”), where it is unexpected, is called syncopation.

Example: one and two and three and four

Some balance is required between repeating and varying rhythmic patterns within a song. If we incorporate too few rhythmic repetitions, the listener either won’t be drawn in or the song won’t be memorable. Too much pattern variation? The song gets confusing or overwhelming.

And, this concludes your mini music theory lesson!

In Section 2, we'll examine a powerful rhythmic pattern that, when combined with melodic and lyrical repetition, makes a song almost irresistible.

I call it the Line+ Technique. But, first…

Chord Patterns

Most songs have a series of chords that repeat and catch the listener's ear, making chords the third element patterned in songs. Mastering Melody Writing focuses primarily on melody, but since melodies exist within chords, some discussion is necessary.

Before the lyrics of a song begin, chords generally are played as a purely instrumental introduction to the song. The chords and groove (rhythmic feel) establish a mood. Then, throughout the main body of the song, they continue supporting the vocal melody.

Three and Four Chord Songs

The most common patterns (progressions) in popular songs include only three or four chords.

If you search YouTube or the reference website for this book, you'll find a fun video called "The Axis of Awesome," which is a mashup of songs using the same four chord patterns.

This video illustrates two things clearly:

An amazing variety of songs can be written from an identical chord pattern.

Many popular songs use only four chords, so even if you are not a guitar god or keyboard wizard, you can write a catchy song.

If you use the same four chords throughout your song, the challenge is ensuring that each section of the song has a different melody and a different rhythm to that melody. We'll talk about contrasting sections in the chapter on Arc. But, for now, know that many great songs rely more on melodic and rhythmic variation than copious chord changes when writing a compelling song.

Keep in mind, even though the four-chord pattern is used quite a bit, there are other chord repetition patterns that are effective in melody writing. Like four chord songs, three chord songs are also fairly common.

Bruno Mars' hit song, "Just the Way You Are," takes a three chord approach. The same three chord pattern appears in both the verses and the chorus; however, as I mentioned above, the song changes the rhythm and flow of the melody to contrast the verses and the chorus.

In fact, the entire genre of country music is often described as “three chords and the truth!” Blues and early rock-n-roll, too, are based on three chords over a twelve-bar phrase.

One Chord Songs

If utilizing three or four chords on an instrument is daunting, know that a good number of hit songs have been written using only one chord!

Check these out:

Pink – “Get This Party Started”

Bob Marley – “Get Up, Stand Up”

Blake Shelton – “Neon Light”

Aretha Franklin – “Chain of Fools”

Beck – “Loser”

Creedence Clearwater Revival – “Run Through The Jungle”

Steely Dan – “Show Biz Kids”

Harry Nilsson – “Coconut”

Eddy Grant – “Electric Avenue”

Bo Diddley – “Bo Diddley” and “I’m A Man” (Both sides of Bo’s first single are

one chord songs.)

Listen to the examples on www.songtownpress.com to discover how effectively the songwriters use melodies and rhythms in these songs. Notice how they've incorporated both tension and release in the melodies without the aid of resolving chord progressions.

Listen to Aretha sing the chorus lyric to "Chain Of Fools."

Chain, chain,chain…

Her voice stretches the third word chain out longer, starting a half-step under the eventual note in pitch and slowly bending up to the correct notes. This slow bending action builds tension in the song even though the chords never change.

Blake Shelton utilizes the same technique on his song "Neon Light." He sings the word light bending up to the note from a lower pitch creating beautiful tension, and then, release.

There's a neonlight…

As you listen to these one chord songs, observe how the contrasting melodies and rhythms between verses and choruses keep your interest. Many songs based around one chord employ a repeated instrumental pattern (called a riff or motif) to make the song more memorable. The repeated pattern is often played on a bass, guitar, or keyboard and gives the feeling of harmonic movement, even

though it’s based around a single chord. As you dig deeper into the playlist, you’ll notice that most one chord songs are mid- to up-tempo. They have a groove. They have energy!

Finally, remember that chords are a powerful tool for establishing the basic mood of a song. They paint with a wide brush of emotion and make the listener feel happy, sad, joyful, or melancholy. I suggest experimenting with different chord patterns under a melody, rather than settling for the first pattern that comes to mind. Pay attention to how different chord progressions make you feel. Do the chords match the mood of the lyric? Experimenting freely will lead to more control over chord choices while developing chordal instincts.

Section 2: The Line+Technique: Uncovering a Secret Melody Pattern for Hookier Songs

I co-lead an online songwriting community called SongTown. In the course of mentoring these aspiring songwriters from around the world, I’ve had the opportunity to listen to and critique thousands of songs.

In the attempt to help up-and-coming songwriters make their songs better, one day I discovered a timeless device I call the Line+technique.

Once I explained the pattern to songwriters and gave them a few examples, the songs they were writing began to sound more commercial and engaging. The end result leveled up what they were writing before learning and experimenting with the Line+technique. After hearing this idea, even professional songwriters have found it influences and improves their writing. They may have used Line+ intuitively in the past, but now they have a tool they can use more consciously and deliberately to bring their songs to a new level. I truly believe that if you

grasp and use this concept, your songs can be better.

One hit songwriter recently dropped in on my workshop and told me this story. As a lyricist, he had written the words to many hits, but his publisher never liked any melodies he'd written. So, as a result, he co-wrote with great melody writers and had a lot of success. One day he saw a video of me explaining my Line+ technique and decided to try it. He wrote both the melody and lyrics to a new song and sent it to his publisher. Everyone at his publishing company loved the song. He didn't mention to his publisher that he employed the Line+ technique… he winked at me and said it was our secret.

I called Line+ a "secret," but it has actually been in use for hundreds of years! The secret is: I figured out how to teach this way of making songs hookier and patterns more accessible to the songwriter.

Section 3: What is Line+Technique?

Discovering the Line+ Technique

I remember it clearly…just an ordinary day and the beat changed everything.

I was in my recording studio watching a video of a friend talk about a drumbeat called the "Tresillo," which came out of Africa and found its way to the Caribbean Islands. The tresillo is often used in drum patterns in modern music.

The word tresillo comes from the Spanish word meaning triplet or three equal notes in the span of two beats.

I started thinking about a song I'd heard on the radio featuring a guitar strum vamping on the same pattern. It hit me that maybe singers use this in song melodies…all at once, songs that used the tresillo beat in the vocal melody began flooding my mind.

However, I also noticed other songs using different patterns of three—not just the tresillo. The constant in the songs is a three-note pattern at the end of a melodic line. I scribbled on a notepad…"Line+3." Over the next few days, I recognized it in classical music, dance, jazz, and country. It's everywhere!

Next, I started envisioning variations. Line+2…3+Line…2+Line+3. I was energized and more creative than ever. It was as if a door of understanding opened to a whole new way of approaching my melody writing. I had used Line+3 in songs occasionally. Some of these songs got recorded by big artists. Some became hits, but I never understood what I was doing. It was all pure instinct.

By putting a name to it, I realized I had only scratched the surface of what this technique could bring to my songwriting. Once I opened this door and understood what I was hearing, the technique led me down completely new musical pathways in my melody and lyric writing!

Let me explain the principles I have discovered, developed, and incorporated into my own writing to create more memorable and lasting melodies.

What is the Line+3 Technique?

Most people think of melody as a series of notes or pitches, but as a songwriting mentor and coach, I think of melody in terms of rhythmic patterns as well. Line+3 is a song pattern that uses rhythm, rhyme, and melodic repetition to make songs better. It can make them more memorable and compelling to the ear; this is often called "hookier" in songwriter lingo. The reason it is called hookier is because the human ear (and brain) gets "caught" by certain patterns and repetitions like a fish biting down on a hook. If you can hook your listener on the first listen, you're more likely to write a successful song.

I've called this technique Line+3 because this is the most common form I hear in songs. Here, in Mastering Melody Writing, it also might be called "Line+" or "+Line" because there are multiple variations that involve repetitions of two or four beats or notes, instead of three. In addition, this technique can be used at the beginning of a line, rather than the end.

Line+3 is not just a modern pattern.

Listen to the finale from Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" (the one with the cannons, if that helps you remember it.) If you still don't know how this music goes, find it on songtownpress.com and listen, please!

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da . . . dum, dum, dum

Do you see it (and hear it)? Three beats clumped together at the end of the line and repeated:

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da . . . dum, dum, dum

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da . . . 1, 2, 3

Even when it changes notes, it repeats the same rhythmic pattern:

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da . . . dum, dum, dum

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da . . . dum, dum, dum

The Beatles' song "Yesterday," the most covered song of all time, has a number of these three-note rhyming sections:

Yesterday

All my troubles seemed so… far-a-way

Now it looks as though they're…here-to-stay

Oh, I believe in…Yes-ter-day

One of the best examples of Line+3 from the disco era is "Never Gonna Give You Up" with Rick Astley singing. It uses the classic tresillo or triplet feel at the end of his chorus vocal lines. And yes, you are about to be Rick-Rolled!

Never gonna… give-you-up

Never gonna…let-you-down

Never gonna…run-a-round

And desert you

Never gonna…make-you-cry

Never gonna…say-good-bye

Never gonna…tell-a-lie

And hurt you

I like to think of these types of melody patterns as two separate parts: the “Line” followed by the “3.”

Never gonna… give-you-up

Never gonna…let-you-down

Or…

Never gonna…1-2-3

Never gonna…1-2-3

This triplet 1-2-3 pattern is not only prominent in melody, but often, is played with musical instruments on songs. Listen to the mallet/percussion sound in Ed Sheeran’s “Shape of You.” You’ll hear this three-note feel clearly. This is the tresillo beat that led me to Line+3.

Really, listen. I'm serious. Stop reading. Go find these pieces of music and listen to them until you can identify the three-note sections in each of them. It will make the concepts in the rest of this book much easier to understand.

The Rule of Three

In storytelling, there is a principle called "The Rule of Three." This principle points to the tendency for plays, movies, and stories to have three repeating or related elements. Stories and plays usually have three acts. In fairy tales, the hero is often granted three wishes. In the story, "The Three Little Pigs," the big bad wolf visits three different pig's houses. We tend to receive and retain stories better when there is a beginning, middle, and end.

The power of three goes well beyond storytelling. There's the Biblical Holy Trinity. Or, the three-sided pyramids of Egypt. There is something about groupings of three that appeal to the human mind. And so, too, there is something about the power of three that hooks the ear in music.

Making Line+3 Even More Hooky

The most hooky version of Line+3 uses three (there it is again, that Rule of Three!) repeating elements: melody, rhythm, and rhyme.

Think again of that memorable section in the finale of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" (the one with the cannons):

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da . . .dum, dum, dum

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da . . .1, 2, 3

Each line ends with three distinct and strong notes. Those final three notes are slower and more deliberate, almost as if separated from the rest of the melody line that comes before.

If we insert some silly lyrics to sing with the three-note phrase, we might have:

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da . . . Can't yousee?

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da . . . It isthree

Or, we could have these equally silly lyrics:

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da . . . I loveyou

Da-da-da-da-da-da-da . . . It's thetruth

The point is that the most hooky thing a songwriter can do is repeat the three-note melody, the three-note rhythm, and add the lyrical three-syllable rhyme (or near rhyme). The brain grabs onto that quickly. When the pattern is repeated several times, we're ready to sing along and remember that signature part of the song.

Once you become aware of this pattern, I predict you'll start hearing it all over the place.

A Warning: Enough Is Enough

If you take time to listen to the songs mentioned, you'll notice something crucial about how they use Line+3. The songwriters use it in two or three lines. Then, they don't use it in the next line or two. Sometimes they use Line+3 again after not using it for several lines. The ear gets fatigued when hearing the same repeating pattern too often.

Likewise, you might notice that the songwriter either uses Line+3 in the verse or the chorus, but rarely, in both places. So, be careful not to overuse Line+3. Think of it like a little bit of spice to enhance the appeal of your songwriting dish; however, if overused, you'll spoil the whole song.

A Tip: Choose Descriptive Words

The lyrics in the "+3" section are more memorable than other lyrics in the song, so make sure to choose important words. Don't waste your opportunity on words like "and" and "the" in these key positions.

Here's one way to ensure you use the +3 pattern with the right words. Look through your lyrics and underline important or descriptive words that convey emotion or meaning. Then, if it works melodically and structurally, put the +3 pattern with those words. Or, try rearranging lyric lines to place the descriptive words in the +3 section.

Good Examples of Line+3 from Hit Songs

NF's song "Let You Down" consists of several Line+3 lines in a row. This grabs your ear from the first listen. Here are the rhyming words at the end of each line in which the triplet rhythm repeats:

Edge right now

Say I'm proud

Let you down (Let you down)

Head get loud

Shut them out

Let you down (Let you down)

Post Malone's "Better Now" starts immediately with a number of Line+3 lines and draws us in—or, better labeled, Line+3 +3, as he repeats the three at the end of each line.

Da, Da, Da, Da, Da, Da, Da…Better now, Better now

Da, Da, Da, Da, Da, Da, Da…Not around, Not around

Let you down

Let you down

Eric Church nails Line+3 in his chorus of "Round Here Buzz":

‘Round here buzz

‘Round here none

Down goes up

One stop light

Welcome sign

‘Round here buzz

Devin Dawson’s country pop hit song “All On Me”uses Line+3 for a hooky chorus, and also, employs the technique of rhyming the first words of the +3 sections (call and fall/out and count/high and time). In addition, he ends each line the with repeated words on me for added hookiness:

Call on me

Fall on me

Out on me

Count on me

High on me

Time on me

Even slow ballads in 6/8 time benefit fromLine+3. Check out the chorus of Ed Sheeran’s “Perfect”:

Fell in love

What it was

Give you up

Kiss me slow

All I own

Eyes you're hold-in

And, for a final example of the power of three, here are some of the song titles from Bruce Springsteen's Born In The USA album. Half of the songs on this iconic album employ three-syllable titles:

"Cover Me"

"Downbound Train"

"Bobby Jean"

"Glory Days"

"My Hometown"

Even the title song, "Born in the U.S.A.," has the three syllables U.S.A. at the end. Line+3wins!

Born in the…1, 2, 3

Springsteen clearly has an intuitive feeling for using the power of three in his songs. His success speaks for itself.

So, using the +3 pattern at the end of a lyrical and melodic line is probably the most common way, but not the only way to use the Line+ technique.

Section 4: Variations on Line+

Let's examine some variations on the method.

Variation: 3+Line

Sometimes, the three-beat repetition occurs at the beginning of the line, rather than at the end. I call this 3+Line. It works exactly the same as Line+3, but in reverse.

Thomas Rhett's country pop hit song, "Unforgettable,"uses this 3+Line pattern in the chorus. He starts every chorus line with a repeating three-note/three-beat phrase. He doesn't rhyme these since he uses rhyming at the end of the line.

Mang-o-ri…ta you were drinking and that

Cold play song…that you were singing and I

Bet right now…you're probably thinking

*Note: The writers get extra bonus points for using colorful, descriptive words in the 3 section. Mango rita and Coldplay song are mucho descriptive words. Placing them over the +3 section makes the songtrès hooky.

Thomas Rhett uses this 3+Line pattern again, but this time it lands in the verse of his hit song “Craving You”:

Every time

Say goodbye

Every touch

Strongest drug

Rhett appears to like this pattern because another of his hit songs, “Life Changes,” also uses the 3+Linepattern. In this one, the chorus 3+Line pattern doesn’t even change the words. He just repeats the phrase: “life changes” with the same rhythm and melody.

Here’s an example from a hit song I co-wrote with Darius Rucker: “History in the Making,” which uses the 3+Line pattern in the chorus.

This could be

Me-mo-ries

Ba-by this

Last first kiss

Maren Morris's "I Could Use a Love Song"uses 3+Line:

Long gone drive

Don't know why

I could cite many other examples, but you get the point by now. You can use the 3+ pattern at the beginning or the end of a melodic line.

Line+2 and 2+Line

This technique is a little less common, but still shows up often as two rhyming syllables at the beginning or the end of a line.

Little Big Town's country song of the year "Girl Crush" uses this Line+2pattern:

Girl crush

Heart rush

Real bad

She has

No peace

Bedsheets

Dan+Shay's country pop hit "Speechless" uses several two-syllable near rhymes on the same melody to grab listeners:

Speechless

That dress

Secret

Weakness

Nervous

PRO TIP: Big bonus points on Dan+Shay's hit. The writers tell an interesting story using only the +2 section. Speechless, That dress, Secret, Weakness, Nervous…

We get a good sense of what this song is about without even reading the complete lyric.

The Beatles' song "Wait" has some memorable Line+2 lyrics and melodies.

Long Time

Now I'm

Way now

Oh how

Dustin Lynch's country hit "Good Girl" usesLine+2in the title and other lines:

Good girl

Whole world

1+Line

While much rarer, some songs use a 1+ pattern.

Take a listen to Dua Lipa's "New Rules" to hear a good example of 1+Line. She uses one-syllable words starting the chorus with the word "one," and then, starting subsequent chorus lines with "two" and "three" to hook the listener.

Of course, there are other variations: Line+4and4+Line; Line+5and5+Line, but again, I think you get the point! The important thing is that you start hearing melody, not only as a series of notes, but also, as hooky rhythmic patterns.

Section 5: How to LearnLine+

How do you apply the Line+ technique in your songwriting if you don't use it naturally? Here are a few ideas and exercises to practice and master the

technique.

Raise Your Awareness Through Inspired Listening (see Introduction)

Three simple actions can quickly ratchet up your awareness:

Listen for the Line+ pattern in songs on the radio or in TV shows and movies.

Make a Spotify or Apple Music playlist of Line+ songs for deeper analysis.

Listen for the placement of the Line+ pattern in each of those songs.

As you listen, continually ask yourself questions such as

Which variation of Line+ does the songwriter use?

Is it at the beginning of the line? The middle? The end?

Is it in the verse or the chorus?

Does the writer also include repeating rhymes?

How many lines of Line+ occur before the writer moves on and establishes a different rhythmic pattern?

How many lines of that new pattern do I hear before the song returns to the Line+ pattern?

Learn to Play and Sing Line+3 Songs: Absorb Line+ into Your Body

Another good way to learn Line+ is to learn to play and/or sing hit songs with these patterns. Melody is a mental, emotional, and physical experience. Performing music can help you master the nuances of how other songwriters use the Line+ technique by absorbing the pattern into your body. Memorizing melodies from other people's songs will speed up the process of creating your own hooky melodies.

Great guitarists spend many hours learning new songs from their guitar heroes. Likewise, memorizing great songs will help build and expand your musical vocabulary. I say you should focus on the hit songs, because these songs have proven catchy, and therefore, have used the Line+ pattern in a good way.

Tapping into Line+

Our songwriting brains often get stuck in our usual patterns. One way to change these patterns is to drop out the melody, chords, and lyrics and simply tap out a rhythm to which you can write.

Try tapping out a rhythm and end with a pause, and then, three clustered taps. Do this a few times until you have that pattern down. You may have to record it and listen to the rhythm again and again to get out of your old grooves.

Next, try adding some melody notes to the rhythm you tapped out. When you're happy with the melody, try adding a few three-word or three-syllable phrases to

the melody.

Now, try the same thing, but place the +3 at the beginning of the line.

Try the variations I mention above as well (Line+2; 2+Line; Line+4; 4+Line).

Lastly, write a few lines and melodies to each of these.

You don’t have to write an entire song. Simply use these exercises to start mastering the Line+ pattern.

Rewriting with Line+

Try taking one of your existing songs and rewriting it with Line+.

Find one of your songs that you think can be improved or made more hooky. If the song has lyrics that have three syllables, even better.

Re-write a few of the lines using the Line+ or +Line pattern (or one of the variations).

If you need to, tap out the new rhythm as described above and use it as a guide.

Try Co-writing with Someone Who Gets Line+

When my co-author Bill first learned the Line+ pattern from me, he found it difficult to incorporate into his songwriting. But, he often co-wrote with songwriters who were better at using this pattern intuitively. Writing with them helped Bill get a feel for using the Line+ pattern in his writing.

Getting Started in the Co-writing Room

Bring in three-syllable titles as your contribution to the co-writing room. Also, think of lyrics that use three syllables. You can suggest using Line+ to a co-writer who is not aware of the pattern. (Gift them Mastering Melody Writing or suggest they get a copy.)

Just as I suggested before, learning to play and/or sing the songs you co-write with people who are more skilled at using Line+ will help you get the pattern in your bones.

Line+ Summary

Once I recognized this pattern and named it, I shared the Line+ technique with the songwriters in my SongTown MasterClasses. They got excited and started writing better songs. One of my student writers remarked, “I can’t believe I never noticed this before. Even my wife, who is not a musician, can pick it out as we listen to the radio! We play a game to see who can call out the patterns

first.”

It’s been rewarding to witness many of these students landing staff writer deals at major publishing companies, getting songs recorded by major artists, and hearing their songs on radio. In my own songwriting, I’ve started using it more consciously than ever before.

Remember, though, Mastering Melody Writing is not just about providing specific tools for writing more compelling melodies. It is also about raising your awareness of hooky patterns and discovering additional patterns to add to your toolbox for future songwriting. You might just revisit past songs with your new techniques, too.

And, of course, Pattern is only one of the elements used in writing great melodies.

In the next section, we will look at Repetition.

Chapter 1 RECAP: Patterns

Music patterns consist of three main elements: melody/notes, rhythm, and chords.

Well written patterns hook the listener.

Melody must incorporate tension and release to keep the audience listening, especially when working with only a few chords.

Line+ is a powerful system of melodic pattern writing that makes songs more memorable.

The most popular variation of Line+ is Line+3, but many other effective variations exist: Line+2, 3+Line, 1+Line, Line+3+3, etc.

Chapter 2

Repetition

Creating interesting melodic patterns is only the first step in making your melodies memorable. Next, you must find creative ways and places to repeat these patterns.

Many times, when critiquing songs, I'll spot a great melodic pattern established by the writer. Often, it will be at the beginning of their chorus. My ear perks up, and then, I am let down. Why? Because nowhere in the chorus is that awesome pattern repeated. I am promised a great hooky chorus and it never materializes. A big part of learning to write memorable songs is spotting when you've created a great hook–and then, to repeat it. When and how to repeat a great hook is something fine-tuned with practice.

Well-written songs soak into our brains by creating ear candy and hooks that make us eager to hear the song again and again. A major way to create ear candy is by selectively repeating some melodic patterns.

Of course, there is a fine balance when it comes to repetition. Too little, and the listener doesn't have much to grab onto. Too much, and the song becomes boring, especially after several listens. But, the human brain loves repetition. Songwriters and performers love it when they see and hear the audience singing parts of the song after a few listens.

I remember the first time I stood off stage and watched Darius Rucker perform our song “Don’t Think I Don’t Think About It” to a live audience. By the second chorus, the entire audience was singing along to the repeated words: Don’t think I don’t.

Don’t think I don’t think about it

Don’t think I don’t have regrets

Don’t think it don’t get to me

Between the work and the hurt and the whiskey

Don’t think I don’t wonder ‘bout

Coulda been shoulda been all worked out

I know how I felt and I know what I said

But, don’t think I don’t think about it.

Even though the audience hadn’t memorized all of the words yet, they could sing along to the chorus that repeats the words Don’t think I don’t… five times. The real trifecta is how we married the words Don’t think I don’t to the same melody notes and rhythm pattern each time they repeated. And, to keep it interesting, we used the end of the lyric lines to tell the story. From the crowd’s reaction, we knew we had a hit on our hands. Darius rode the song all the way to the top of the Billboard charts for his first #1 single.

Repeated melodies sometimes outshine rhyming in a successful song. Listen to one of Paul Simon’s early songs, “America.” You may not notice it has almost no end rhymes. The closest he comes are raincoat/ago and why/turnpike on only four of the song’s twenty-two lines.

These elements of the song can be repeated to hook the listener and make it more memorable:

Rhythms

Melodies

Chords and chord patterns

Words and phrases

Number of syllables and repeated emphasis on syllables

Riffs (instrumental patterns)

Production elements

Vowel sounds and rhymes

Consonants (also called alliteration)

Today, many melodies are influenced by hip-hop and rap, which often use rhythmic hooks.

When my co-author Bill first started pitching his songs, he heard time and again that the songs were fine, but the melodies were dated. Even though the production was modern, the songs sounded dated because there were few, if any, rhythmic repetitions.

After participating in one of my melody MasterClasses, Bill started listening to more recent hit songs and paid particular attention to the rhythmic repetitions and hooks I had highlighted in my class. Soon, by using the Inspired Listening technique, he was hearing and incorporating new rhythmic patterns into his songwriting. He told me he no longer hears the comment that his songs are not contemporary.

So, let’s start with rhythmic repetition.

Rhythmic Repetition

A rhythmic pattern is defined as the placement of sounds in time, an ordered alternation of contrasting beats. It is a strong, regular, repeated pattern of sound.

When you repeat rhythmic patterns in sections of your song, you hook the listener. Their brains will begin to anticipate this pattern after it repeats a few times.

Rhythmic repetition has a formal name in music: Ostinato, which derives from the Italian word for obstinate. But, we’ll just call it by its street name of “rhythmic repetition” here.

Rhythm can exist without melody, as in simply clapping your hands or playing the drums, but melody cannot exist without rhythm. Therefore, songs cannot exist without rhythm. So, learning to create hooky rhythmic patterns, and repeating them in interesting ways, will significantly improve the quality of your songs.

Listen to the chorus of “Stayin’ Alive” sung by the Bee Gees:

Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin’ alive, stayin’ alive

Clap along to the rhythm of these chorus lyrics as they play. Now, turn off the music and clap the rhythm without the melody notes. This is a basic rhythm pattern. Train your ear to hear rhythm patterns separately from the melody notes.

If you are a drummer or have a strong sense of rhythm, this won’t be a challenge. But, using your Inspired Listening technique and becoming acutely aware of what makes certain patterns hooky in great songs will make your own writing stronger. Inspired Listening will also help you develop a sixth sense for intuiting how often to repeat patterns.

The Bee Gees knew their rhythmic pattern was hooky. They added melody notes and lyrics, and then, repeated it perfectly throughout the song choruses. This attention to rhythm helped them write one of the most definitive disco songs.

Put It into Practice
Listen to the rhythmic pattern in the chorus of “Stayin’ Alive.” Rewrite the melo

Make this a regular exercise in your writing life. Learning to write new melodies and chords to a set rhythm pattern will help you master two big things: how to hear rhythm and melody as two separate entities; and, how to use repeated rhythmic patterns as a springboard to creating your own hooky songs.

PRO TIP: You can also keep the listener's ear by repeating a pattern, and then, introducing a variation on that pattern: an extra beat or note, a stretched out version of the repeated pattern, or a shortened version. Be careful not to repeat this same rhythm throughout the entire song (or even entire sections), because you may lose the listener and render the song boring.

Writing to Drum Loops: Track People and Top-Lining

A lot of modern songwriting is a collaboration between track people and top-liners. A track person (beat maker) often creates a music track or groove before the songwriting session and uses it to jump-start songwriting ideas in the co-writing room. These track creators are treasured by songwriters because hearing a cool new groove can spark inspiration immediately. Track people also tend to approach songs from a rhythmic or beat sensibility; and, hooky melody rhythms often come more easily when writing to tracks.

There are also apps that generate rhythmic patterns and drum loops. Use these to discover rhythmic patterns that inspire you to write. Modern recording software programs (called Digital Audio Workstations or DAWs) have built-in drummers, loops, or drum patterns that songwriters use for rhythmic patterns and inspiring songs.

In fact, my first #1 song, “Beautiful Mess,” sung by Diamond Rio, was written to a drum loop. I was hanging out in the writing room with Shane Minor and Sonny Lemaire. We started talking about our mutual love for the Red Hot Chili Peppers. I pushed a button to play a loop on my computer and rapped these lines Going out of my mind these days. Like I’m walking ‘round in a haze, in the Pepper-style of rapping. We all fell out laughing. Then it hit us, this sounded pretty cool. We had the inspiration to begin a new song! In “Beautiful Mess,” the first two lines are identical both rhythmically and melodically establishing a repeated pattern for our verse. We added a melody, instead of rapping the words. When we finished the song, we demoed it in a more country style with a seven-piece live band—and we had our first #1 hit as a songwriting team.

If creating drumbeats and recording music is not your thing, don’t fret. You are probably more suited to be a top-liner. Top-liners work with the track-person adding melody and lyrics on top of the musical track. In modern co-writes, there can be more than one top-liner on a song. In my songwriting session for “Beautiful Mess,” all of us were top-liners because we top-lined over a drum loop on my computer.

Often in a co-write one top-liner or writer creates the melody and the other writes the lyrics—or each does a little of both. In these scenarios, everyone is vital to the song in a different way. The musical track, lyrics, and melody are all written by a team of track people and top-liners.

One of the big perks to writing this way is you can have a finished, or nearly finished, demo of your song by the end of the writing session!

Put It into Practice
Ask songwriter or musical friends for recommendations, or search your app stor

PRO TIP: Be careful not to let the beat take over. It's there to support the melody. So, always make sure your melody is hooky, with or without the beat beneath it. It's easy to get enamored with a cool sounding beat and fail to assess if your melody patterns are interesting.

Repeated Melodies

Obviously, some melody patterns should repeat in your song because the human brain seeks out the familiar. You have about three minutes to repeat some parts of your melodies so that the brain recognizes something familiar in the new song.

Interestingly enough, there seems to be a limit as to how many times you can repeat the same pattern without the brain wanting to hear something slightly new, such as an extra bar of music added to what is familiar or a new pattern. I have noticed that in many hit songs the repeated melody pattern happens only two or three times before a new pattern or element is introduced.

What makes acid jazz or atonal classical music so hard for most people to relate to is the lack of repetition. An advanced listener can find patterns in these genres, but most casual listeners just want to hear something simple that repeats and grabs them. Nursery songs, hymns, and national folk songs often have simple, repeating melodies. Think "Mary Had a Little Lamb," "Happy Birthday," or "Amazing Grace." When you are writing a song, try to find the sweet spot between atonal classical or jazz and simple nursery songs.

Let's look at the chorus of a song that crossed genres to become a #1 hit in both

pop and country. “Body Like A Backroad,” sung by Sam Hunt, has a simple, yet extremely hooky melody.

Body like a backroad	(establishes a set melody pattern
Driving with my eyes closed	(repeats the melody pattern)
I know every curve like the back of my hand	(variation: starts the same, but v
Doing 15 in a 30	(returns to original pattern)
I ain’t in no hurry	(repeats the original pattern)
I’mma take it slow just as fast as I can	(variation: mimics line three)

Some parts of your melody can be simple at the same time that other parts are more complex. Some repeat and some introduce new elements. The balance between the familiar and the new is crucial.

Put It into Practice
Listen to a few of your own songs and ask these questions: Is there too little repe

Repeated Notes

Have you ever played Neil Diamond's song "Sweet Caroline" at a party? As soon as you get to the part in the chorus that goes, Sweet Caroline, a bunch of people in the crowd will inevitably sing, bah, bah, bah, in response.

Those repeated trumpet notes (bah, bah, bah) are memorable—and, they make good use of the power of three!

Sometimes it's a series of notes. Sometimes it's just one or two. Try the party song thing with The Beatles' "You've Got To Hide Your Love Away," and many people will join in on the first word and note of the chorus with, Hey, every time it comes around.

Repeated Chords

Sometimes you can use repeated chords to make your songs more compelling. This way, the chords become part of the melodic hook.

Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama" is a classic tune. You recognize this song as soon as you hear its three opening chords. Outkast's "Hey Ya," "Wild Thing" by The Troggs, "What I Like About You" by The Romantics, and "Closer" by The Chainsmokers all use prominent, repeating chord patterns throughout.

Tom Petty specialized in this way by using repeating chords in “Learning To Fly,” “Won’t Back Down,” “Free Fallin’,” and others.

Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” has an iconic set of four repeating chords that both start the song and run through it. These chords embed the song in the listener’s head and made Nirvana and Kurt Cobain famous. They repeat throughout the song with only a few deviations. This is an approach used by many popular songs.

PRO TIP: When using a single chord pattern throughout your song, it’s important to use deeply contrasting melodies and rhythms between the different sections of your song. You won’t have the benefit of contrasting chord patterns between sections, so the other musical elements carry the responsibility of keeping the listener’s interest. The worst thing you can do, in this case, is have a verse melody and a chorus melody that feel or sound similar.

Repeated Words

While more rare, some songs use the same word or phrase over and over, but vary the melody to make it catchy.

The David Bowie/John Lennon song “Fame” is a nice example of this. Check out all of the different ways they repeat the word fame throughout the song. More examples include: “Million Reasons” by Lady Gaga and the Skip James’ blues song “I’m Glad” (covered by Cream and, later, Eric Clapton).

It might be that a song simply repeats the same phrase with the same melody and rhythm to hook the listener. The Red Hot Chili Peppers did this successfully with their song, “Give It Away.”

I did this in my co-written song, “Fall,” which was a hit in both country (Clay Walker) and adult contemporary (Kimberley Locke). We wanted to create a hook with the word fall by sprinkling it throughout the chorus using it a different way each time:

Fall, go on and fall apart

Fall into these arms

I’ll catch you, every time you

Fall, go on and lose it all

Every doubt, every fear, every worry, every tear

I’m right here

Baby, fall

Repeated Riffs and Production Elements

Remember how The Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction” starts out? There’s a unique fuzz guitar riff at the beginning that, once you hear it, lodges in your brain. My brain translates that guitar riff into 2+3+Line!

1, 2 + 1, 2, 3 + Da Da Da Da Da

It’s the same with The Beatles’ “Paperback Writer.” George Harrison plays a guitar riff you recognize instantly after hearing it the first time. Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way” has an infectious riff that immediately pulls you in and recurs throughout the song. It is so hooky that Run-DMC took it to number one years later with a rap/rock version.

Prince was an expert at creating these hooky riffs. Listen to his song “Delirious” for some synth ear candy that carries on past the intro and pervades throughout the song.

Sam Hunt wrote “Body Like a Back Road” with several other writers. One of the co-writers was Zach Crowell, who started in the music business creating hooky beats he could sell online. He brought that sensibility into his co-writing when he moved to Nashville and became a “track guy.” Listen again to their song. Pay attention to the keyboard riff that begins the song and recurs regularly throughout. This is one of the elements that kept the song at #1 on the country charts for months and helped it become a crossover hit on pop radio as well.

Sometimes these riffs are added by the band or studio musicians when the song is recorded, but they can be an integral part of the songwriting process.

On my song “Beautiful Mess,” my co-writer Sonny Lemaire created a hooky guitar riff in the intro. When Diamond Rio went into the studio to record the song, they recognized it was an important element of the song and kept this hook in their final version. Who knows? We think it might not have made it to #1 without all of these artistic ingredients, including Sonny’s riff.

If you come up with a cool riff to introduce a song or drop into a crucial spot (in

the intro, post-chorus, underneath the verses, or at the end), producers and studio musicians are apt to copy the original riff and leave it in. Riffs are great attitude-setters. They can be low-key and chill or they can be full of swagger. Either way, they should always make a statement!

The best repeated instrumental riffs are pure ear candy and make your song instantly recognizable from the start. Writing a melody and playing over a hooky guitar riff can be tons of fun.

Repeated Consonants

Alliteration consists of repeated consonants at the beginning of words in close succession.

Stephen Stills famously wrote these lines in his “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes”: Lacy lilting lady, losing love lamenting. What the L? That’s a lot of L’s in that lyric. However, it catches your ear, doesn’t it? Joni Mitchell memorably wrote and sang: They paved paradise and put up a parking lot. The Beatles’ “Let It Be” has this alliterative line: Whisper words of wisdom.

Pure ear candy. These are almost melodic lyrics on their own because they use the repeated sounds of consonants.

You also can choose similar consonant sounds that are not in the beginnings of words to bring more musicality to your lyrics.

For example: I hope you understand, we’re both going to have to bend. The “nd” sound ties these two lyrics together in a subtle, musical way.

Put It into Practice
As an experiment, rewrite this line several times using alliteration: There was a t

Repeated Vowel Sounds and Internal Rhymes

Similarly, you can enhance the musicality of your lyrics by repeating vowel sounds. Construct your lyrics to repeat inner rhymes within lines, pre-choruses, verses, choruses, and bridges.

This is different from rhyming at the end of lines. Internal rhymes occur in the middle of lines. These words might rhyme with other words in the line or the word at the end of the line.

From Miley Cyrus' hit "Wrecking Ball":

You put me high up in the sky

and

It slowly turned, you let us burn

Here's an example from one of Bill's recent songs called "Yeah, No."

I can't recall anything at all

They say they're on their way,"We'll pick you up at eight."

Notice how the first line in this pre-chorus has an internal rhyme with the words recall and all. And, the second line uses the repeated internal rhymes of say, way, and eight (a near rhyme that still employs a long 'a' rhyme). The ends of the lines don't rhyme in this song section, but the ear hears these internal rhymes and gets hooked.

Bill and his co-writer use the internal rhyme method again in the first few lines of the chorus:

Yeah, no

Don't want to go there again

Yeah, no

Already know how this one ends

Here the internal rhymes are no, go, and know.

Unless you are writing rap or hip hop, be careful not to overload the listener's ear with too many internal rhymes; however, a few well-placed ones can be good ear candy and hook the listener, even on first listen.

Sometimes, you can even skip the rhyme at the end of the line and simply use internal rhymes, as in the song "Home," a hit for country artist Dierks Bentley (he co-wrote the song with Dan Wilson and Brett Beavers):

Scars, yeah she's got her scars

Sometimes it starts to worry me

Cause lose, I don't want to lose

Sight of who we are

There are no end line rhymes in that verse, but several internal rhymes or near rhymes (scars/starts, lose/who, and times/sight). That must have been enough to grab the listeners since it played regularly on radio climbing the charts to top 20 and certified Gold.

Put It into Practice
Go through a few of your songs one at a time. Listen for the "hookiest" or catchi

PRO TIP: When working on a new song, it is helpful to record yourself during the session on your phone or another recording device. If you do something hooky, you can stop and listen back. If it sounds good, try repeating it. Eventually you won't need the recorder, you'll be able to spot great hooks in real-time and repeat them as needed.

Hotspots

Songs have what I call Hotspots. These are places in a melody that naturally draw in the listener like a moth to a flame. Hotspots can be utilized to add extra hookiness and emotion to songs by infusing the lyrics with rhythmic repetitions, rhyme repetitions, and melody pattern repetitions.

Ends of a Phrase, Rhythm, or Rhyme

Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away

Now it looks as though they're here to stay

Oh I believe in Yesterday

The first Hotspot here is created naturally at the end of each line.

It's the last thing your brain hears in a lyric line before moving on to the next thought or line. So, learning to create something interesting at the end of lines

gives your song a hooky advantage. In the example lyric above, “Yesterday,” Lennon and McCartney finish each line with the +3 technique. This adds an additional hook at the end of each line—that’s an even hotter Hotspot!

The second Hotspot is the most common: the rhyme spot.

Every time a word rhymes with another, it pulls our attention toward the song. That is why more and more songs not only rhyme the ends of lines, but also, contain internal rhymes in each line. For example:

Girl you’re only as lonely as you wanna be

This creates internal melody Hotspots on all three of the rhymed positions. If I write a melody to that lyric line, I would mentally circle the rhyming words and write a melody that, perhaps, uses the same melody notes on the first two rhyming words: only and lonely. I might even go a step further, since both words have two syllables, and employ the same rhythm on only and lonely. (See video example at www.songtownpress.com illustrating this technique.)

High Notes

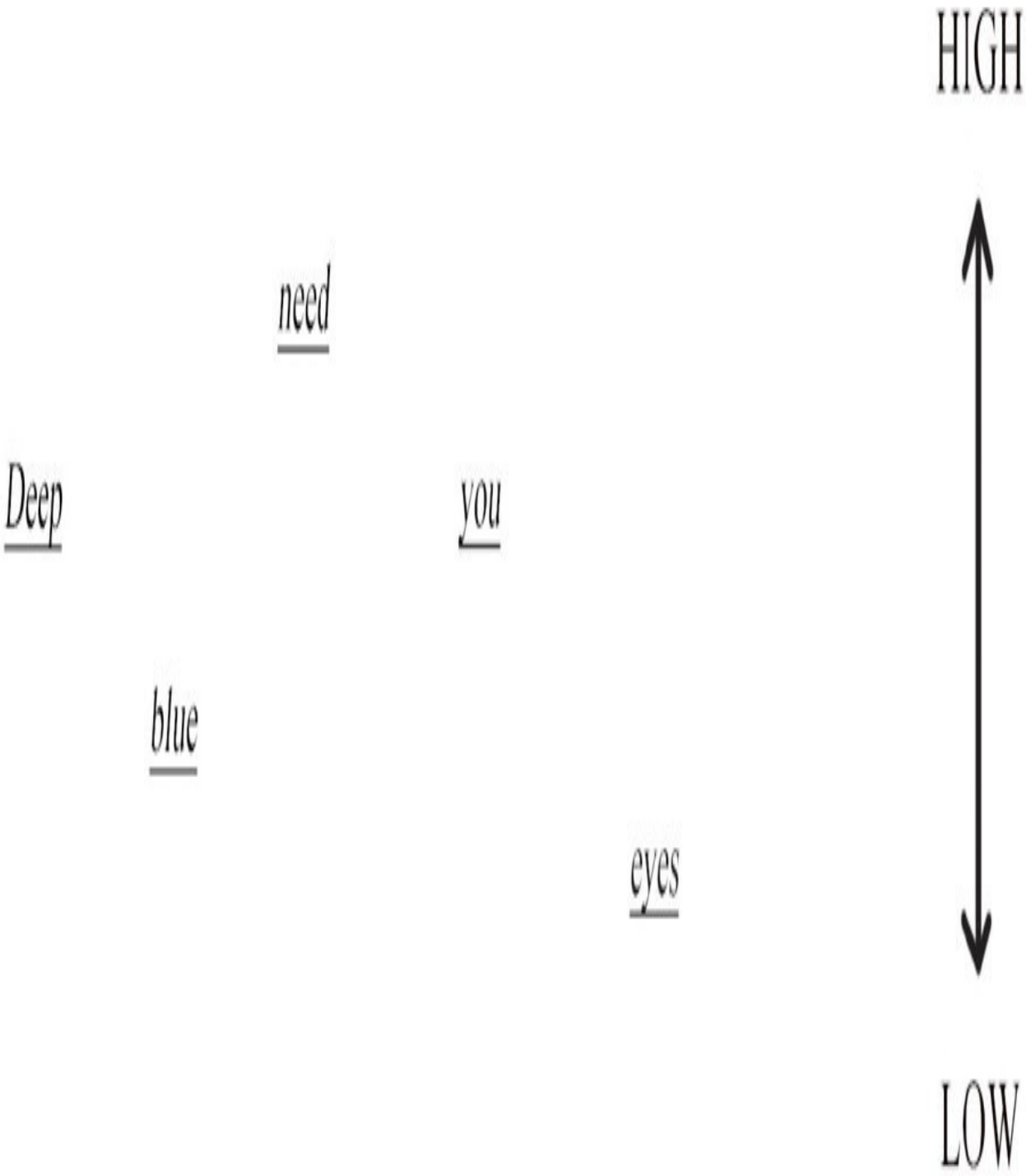
When a singer hits that high note in a song, it’s a powerful Hotspot. High notes always stand out in melody patterns and add both emotion and hookiness. That’s why so many choruses contain the highest notes of the entire song.

If you want to write a strong hook with Hotspots, try combining the high notes in

a melody line with rhyme. A great example of this technique is the song “Must Be Doin’ Somethin’ Right,” sung by Billy Currington. One of the most memorable lyrical lines of the song is found in the chorus:

Deep blue need you eyes

The writers illuminate this line’s internal rhymes with their melody. The words deep and need are placed as the two highest notes of the pattern, and the words blue and you are on the low end of the melody.


HIGH
need
Deep
you
blue
eyes
LOW

The listener hears this pattern as pure gold. The ee sounds go up and the oo sounds go down.

Check out this song sung by Tim McGraw, “Just To See You Smile.” The opening five words of the chorus establish a five-note melody pattern. It’s made more hooky by placing the internal rhyming words to and you as the highest notes in the pattern. Every time the singer hits that high note, it rhymes.

HIGH

to

you

Just

see

smile

LOW

If the writer had written the same melody, but changed the words to Just to see that smile, it would not have been as hooky. Sing it in your head and see what I mean! The internal rhyme, paired with the melodic Hotspot of the high notes, takes this to the next level and makes it more memorable.

Next Up: Important Words

Words carry most of the core meanings and messages of the song. By placing important words in melodic Hotspots, you give them even more power.

In these places, I like to put both repeating notes and different notes. For emphasis, I go up or down from the rest of the melody. I sometimes add syncopation to the important words. Or, I add these words to the three section of a Line+3. The +3 will make the important words stand out, thus, maximizing their impact.

Earlier, we looked at the Beatle's song "Yesterday." They use the technique of Line+3. The "+3" is the melodic Hotspot, so this is where they put rhymes and important words. If you read the important words, they almost tell a story on their own. Add the words troubles and now to the first stanza and it makes sense with only five words! This is excellent example of important words in melodic Hotspots—and probably one of the main reasons it's the most recorded song in the history of music.

Yes-ter-day…. troubles

Far a-way …. Now they're

Here to stay

Title Hotspots: The First and Last Lines

The opening and closing lines of choruses often contain the title of a song. Why? Because the listener tends to remember the very beginning and end of a chorus. First impressions and lasting impressions! These two Hotspots are so important that many modern songwriters put their titles in both places. Some choose to showcase their title only at the end. Historically, in jazz and country, the title would often lie on the first or last line of a verse.

Of course there are many creative ways to vary from these norms, such as sprinkling the title throughout a verse. However, the one inescapable rule is that your listener will key into the first and last lines of your song sections. So, even if your title is not in one of these places, make these melody and lyric lines count.

By studying title Hotspots while practicing daily Inspired Listening, your instincts will develop quickly in this area.

Put It into Practice
Go through your existing lyrics and circle Hotspot words. Then, experiment with

Repeated Interval Jumps

Interval jumps can improve a melody by making it more catchy.

An interval jump is when the melody takes a bigger leap than usual between two notes. Much of the time, melodies may walk up by half steps or whole tones, but sometimes they jump several (or more than several) notes.

Think of the classic standard “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” The first two notes are a nice example of an interval jump in the melody. The word some starts on a note, and then, the next note and word where jump up a whole octave.

where *bow*

ov- *rain-*

the

er

Some-

If you want a fun dive into interval jumps, check out the band Maroon 5. They write these brilliantly into many of their tunes. Listen to their song “One More Night.” At the beginning of each verse line, they sing the word you, then do an interval jump up on the second word and, and then, return to the original note on the word I.

and

You I…go hard at each other like we’re going to war

and

You I…go rough, we keep throwing things and slamming the door

and

You I…get so damn dysfunctional, we start keeping score

and

You I…get sick, yeah, I know that we can’t do this no more

Repeating this interval jump throughout the verse is super catchy. Combine this with the repetition of the lyric You and I on every line and you have a super hooky verse.

Notice how each of the first four lines of the lyric are the same number of

syllables? This creates additional hookiness with another type of pattern: symmetrical lines.

PRO TIP: When I discover a new technique or tool, I've learned it's vitally important to immediately put it into action and incorporate it into a song. When I first became more aware of interval jumps, I had the chance to do just that …

I was asked to co-write with a new artist who had just signed with Warner Music in Nashville. The label felt our styles meshed well, so they asked me to write with Ryan Griffin for his upcoming album project. After a few initial writing sessions, the songs we had written weren't exciting the young artist at all. I decided to take a different approach.

I asked him what he was listening to—what music was he digging? He said he was really into the latest Maroon 5 album. Instantly, I knew what I had to do. I knew from my own Inspired Listening sessions that lead singer Adam Levine often utilized interval jumps when writing melodies for his band. So, I started singing a verse melody that employed some wide interval jumps. "I love that!" Ryan said. By the end of the writing session, we had a song that truly fired him up and one he felt would really showcase his heart and vocals. Because I was aware of the tools Maroon 5 used and had incorporated them into my own toolbox, I could speak the same musical language as the artist I was working with. Once we got on the same page, a cool song followed.

PRO TIP: Interval jumps are useful following a series of repeated patterns. Just when the listener settles into a repeated hook, adding in this device offers variety and keeps your audience engaged. It's a balancing tool between familiar and new.

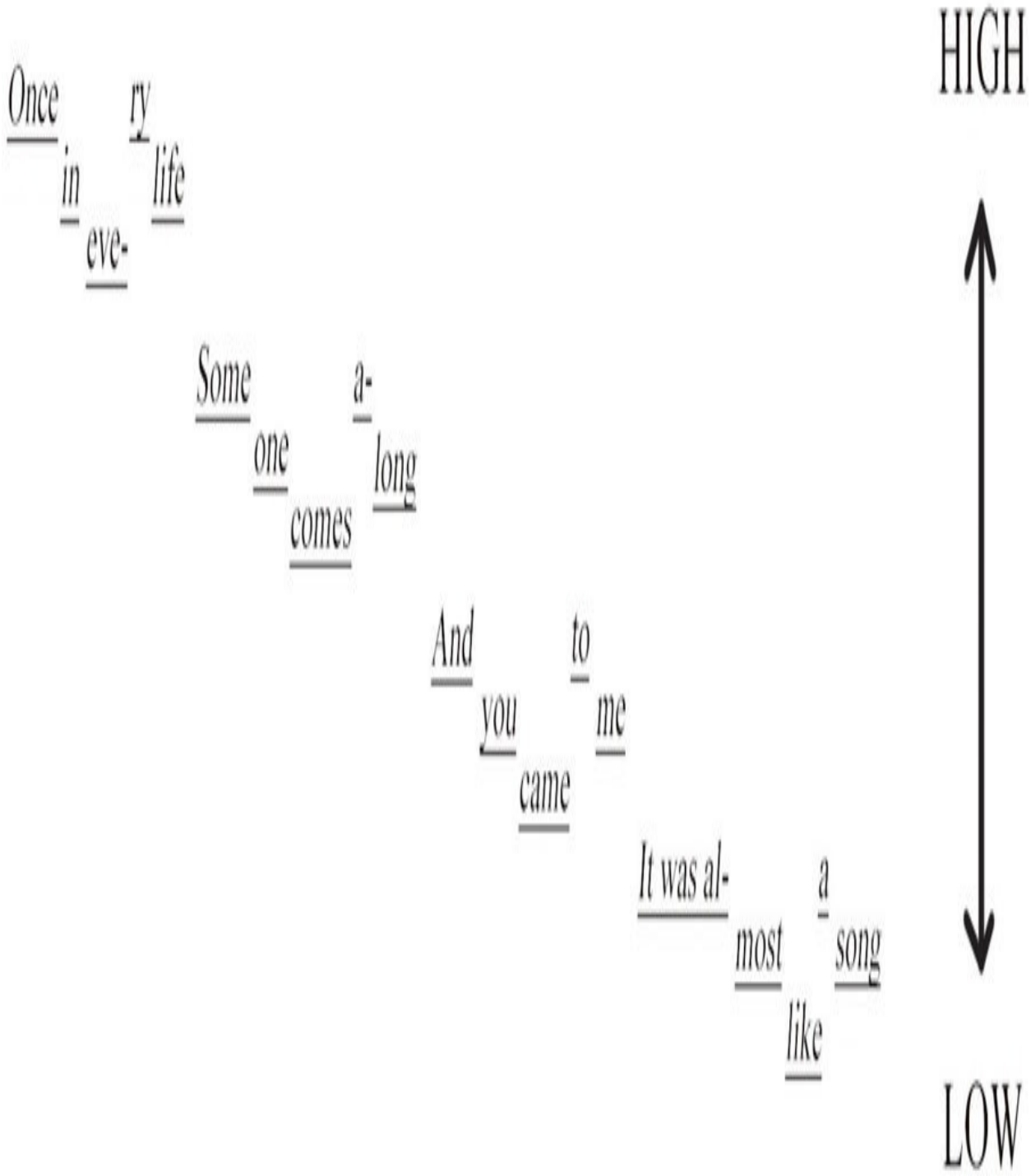
The ET movie theme combines interval jumps with this next technique, which I call Shape Shifting.

Shape Shifting

Shape Shifting takes a melodic pattern and repeats it with different scale notes. To do this, take a melodic shape and move the entire shape higher or lower on the scale. The relationship between the notes usually stays the same, but the repeated pattern starts on a different note, perhaps a few notes lower or higher than the first pattern.

One of the most well-known melodic phrases in music is the opening phrase in Beethoven's "5th Symphony." It uses a rhythmic pattern of three short notes and one long note (ba, ba, ba, bum), and then, repeats that pattern starting on different notes throughout the piece with some variations on the pattern and different instruments playing that pattern (called a motif in musical lingo). As you can hear in Beethoven's piece, the pattern doesn't have to repeat exactly. It can be close with a slight variation.

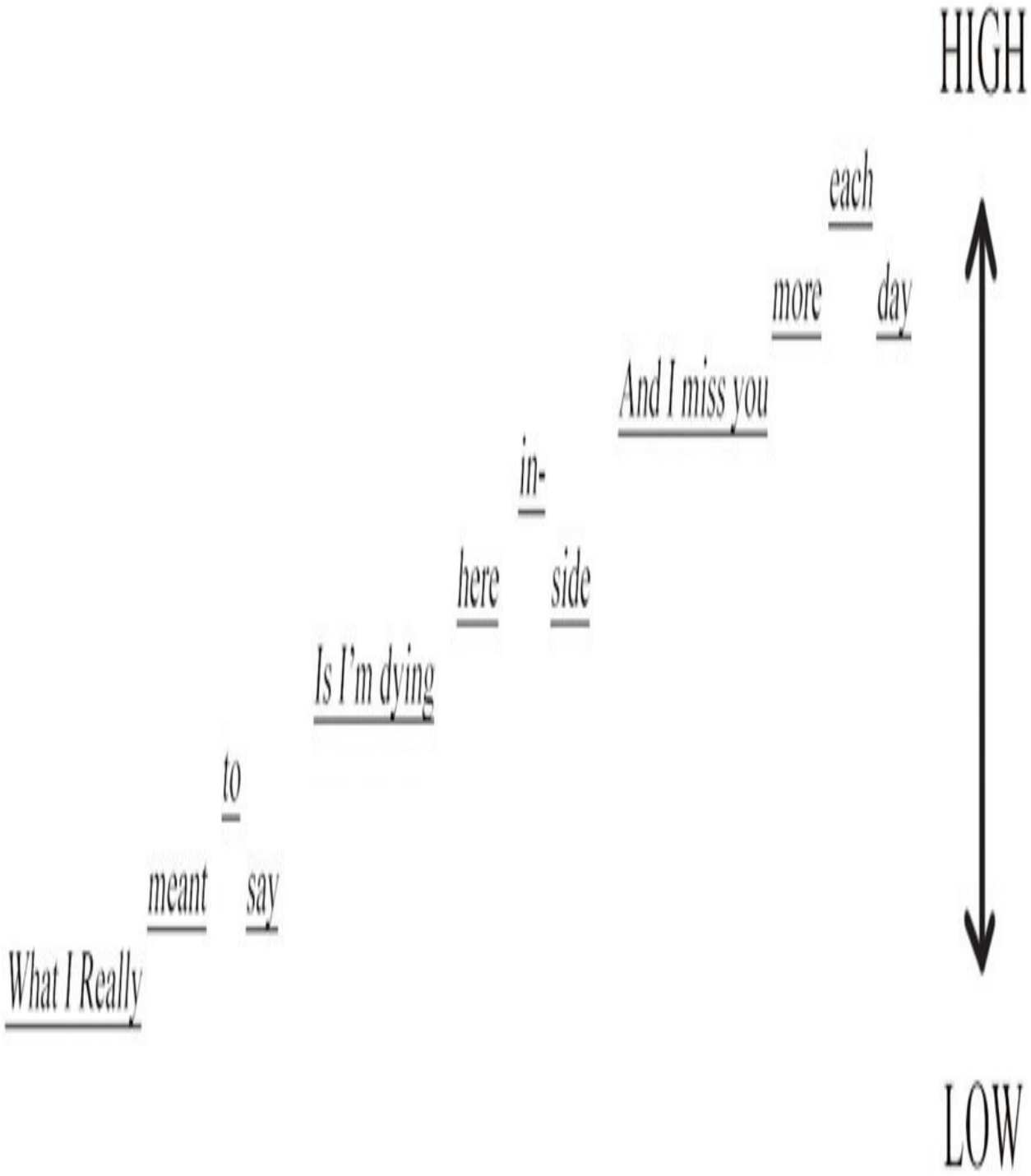
One of the best examples of Shape Shifting lies in the Ronnie Milsap classic "Almost Like A Song," written by Archie Jordan. Every line of the verse uses the same shape, but moves down in pitch. Listen to the song as you follow along to the diagram below.


HIGH
Once in eve- ry life
Some one comes a- long
And you came to me
It was al- most a like song
LOW

Once in every life	(establishes the 5 note shape)
Someone comes a long	(entire shape shifts down in pitch)
And you came to me	(shape shifts down in pitch again)
It was almost like a song	(shape shifts down in pitch again)

I had the pleasure of chatting with Archie Jordan over dinner early in my songwriting career. I told him I thought that song had a beautiful melody. He thanked me and said, “You know, that melody is actually a piano exercise that every young piano student memorizes when they pick up the instrument.” Then he lifted his fingers in the air and played air piano as he sang the notes. A lightbulb went off in my head. He took a simple melody that incorporated Shape Shifting, but added a beautiful chord progression along with it. The chords almost disguise the melody while adding emotion to the simple note pattern.

Another excellent example of Shape Shifting is on the chorus melody of “What I Really Meant To Say,” sung by Cyndi Thomson. Listen how the first three lines use the same shape, but gradually move up the scale.


HIGH
each
more day
And I miss you
in-
here side
Is I'm dying
to
meant say
What I Really
LOW

Listening on, you will notice the next three lines of the chorus work their way back down the scale using a second unique shape. One shape climbs up for the first half of the chorus. Another shape descends down for the second half of the chorus. Very hooky and memorable.

I’ve created some audio samples with simple shapes to listen to on the Mastering Melody Writing website. Listen before doing the exercise below.

Now it’s time for you to try out this Shape Shifting method.

Put It into Practice
Write a short melodic pattern of a few notes. Sing or play the pattern aloud, then

NEWBIE TIP: Even if you don’t play piano, picking out the notes on a piano keyboard will help you see the shapes more clearly. If you are a newbie at writing melodies, don’t worry, these techniques will get easier over time. It’s important that we plant the seed now so you become aware of the techniques. Over time, your subconscious will grasp it and everything will click.

Case Example of Repetition: Don’t Think I Don’t Think About It

The chorus of my hit song “Don’t Think I Don’t Think About It,” recorded by my co-writer Darius Rucker, is a good example of using repeated melodies, words, and rhythms, while at the same time, creating a memorable hook.

The song started with the Talk/Sing Method (see Introduction).

Darius and I were talking about breakups and old loves. He mentioned a grade school crush, and that he still thought about her. I was surprised. “Really?” I asked. “Don’t think I don’t,” he shot back.

Because I had trained myself in the Talk/Sing Method, I immediately sang that line with a melody, “Don’t think I don’t think about it.” We were off to the races. When you listen to the chorus of that song, you will hear the same 5-note melody and rhythm every time we repeat the words Don’t think I don’t. We vary the ends of the lines to keep it interesting, but that basic 5-note pattern is the hook. The words, melody, and rhythm all work together to build a strong hook. And, by changing the chord under each 5-note repetition, we sustain the interest of the listener.

Don’t think I don’t think about it

Don’t think I don’t have regrets

Don’t think it don’t get to me

Between the work and the hurt and the whiskey

Don’t think I don’t wonder ‘bout

Coulda been shoulda been all worked out

I know how I felt and I know what I said, but…

Don’t think I don’t think about it

We went beyond the initial spark of an idea to craft a song that helped establish Darius as a country artist. He would go on to sell millions more records in this genre.

In this chapter, I have given you some of the elements for crafting a compelling and engaging song melody. There is no formula. It’s more a learned skill and intuitive art than science.

Next, we’ll consider the whole song melody and how melody flows and contrasts from section to section in what I call the “Arc” of the song.

Chapter 2 RECAP: Repetition

Repetition is the art of repeating melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic patterns in a creative way.

Hotspots are the naturally-occurring consequence of a melody that draws the listener in like a moth to the flame.

Writing to drum loops and top-lining can propel your creativity in new directions.

Interval jumps are attention grabbers that add extra hookiness to a melody.

Shape Shifting is a repeated melodic pattern that moves up or down the scale. Its strength is its ability to add variety without losing the familiar.

Chapter 3

ARC

Melodic Storytelling and Song Arcs

The human brain seeks out both the familiar and the new. In songwriting, we understand this when we combine new elements with things that repeat. This both draws in listeners and keeps them interested.

The stories in movies and novels have an arc. An arc is the trajectory of the story from where it begins to where it ends; quite simply, it's the journey. A good story takes us on an emotional ride with ups and downs, contrasts between moments or sections, and offers up a theme or motif that pervades the story. It has both intense moments and less intense moments. It has both tension and release of tension.

If a thriller is intense the entire way through, our adrenaline supplies might get depleted so that we end up not responding much when the really thrilling part of the story comes. And, have you noticed that most comedies have serious moments, too? Writers build variations into their story to support the arc.

A melody has an arc, too. If an entire song remains at the same intensity level, the listener would likely be bored or turned off. That's why songs have louder parts, softer parts, higher notes, lower notes, and even, silence. They have short phrases and long phrases, stretched out melodies and fast-paced melodies, longer

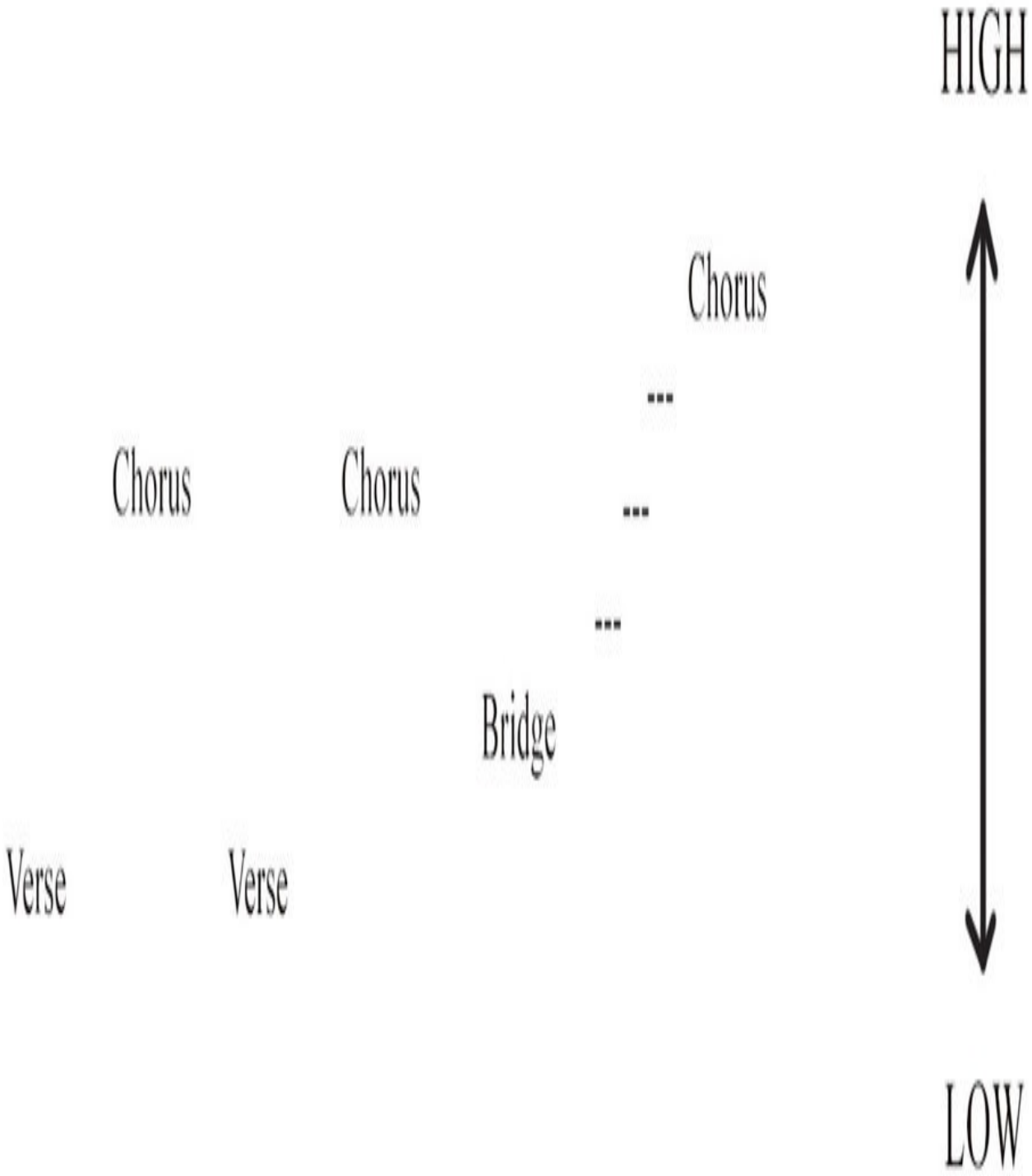
line lengths and shorter line lengths.

A melody wants to take us on a journey. Sometimes it is joyful, sometimes sad—and, sometimes, it calls us to pump our fists or jump up and dance. When the song is over, we should know it's over because the arc finds its way to the ground—or silence—again.

I have heard songwriters playing their songs live, and when they finish playing the song, it just fades out. When this happens, it takes a moment for the crowd to realize the song is over. Commercially produced songs rarely suffer from this problem. But, we can create arcs in our melody writing without relying on a studio produced track to make the arc obvious.

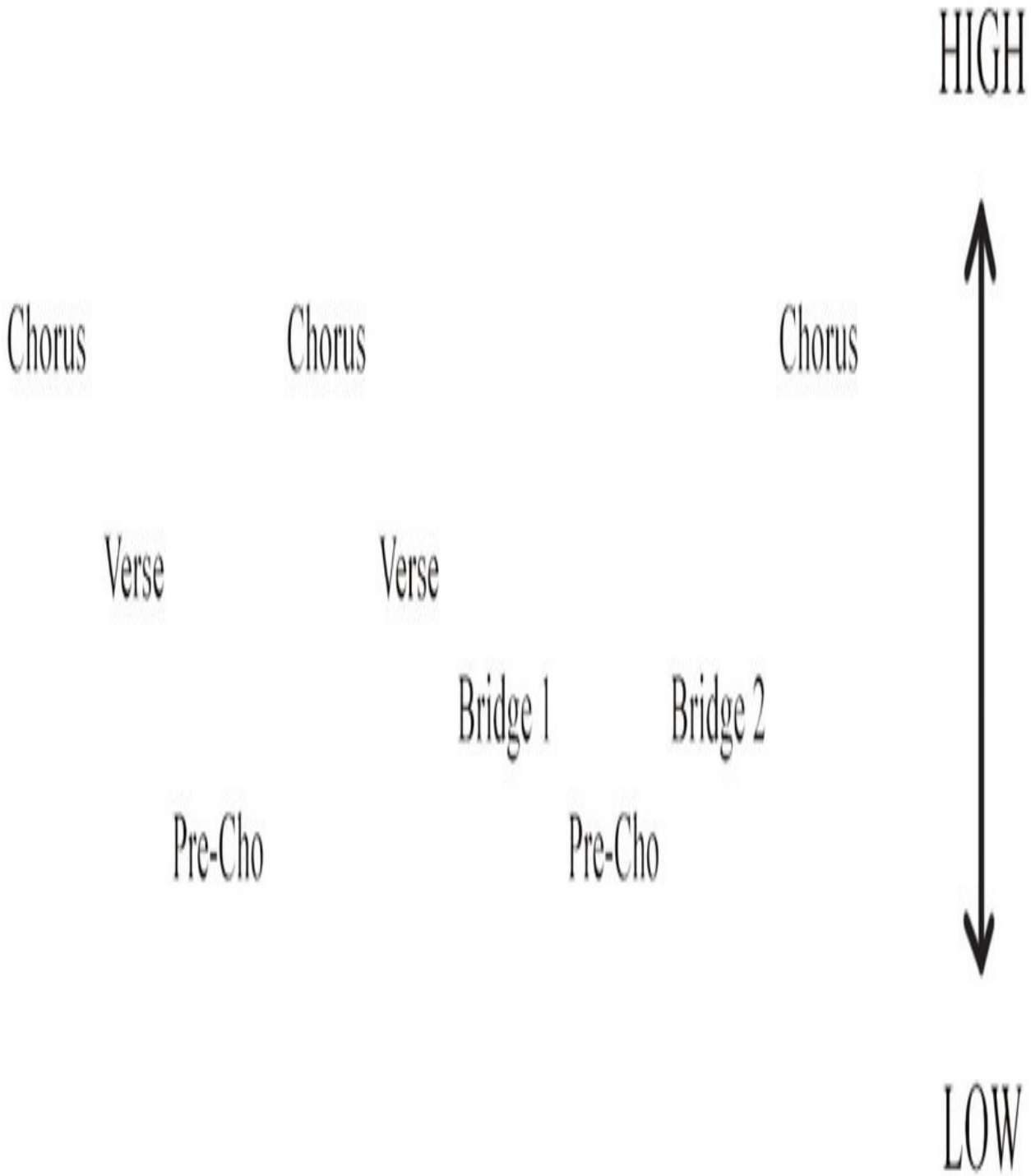
In many songs, choruses go up in melodic pitch and intensity. This is the section of the song where the singer hits the exciting, high notes. Remember those Hotspots we talked about in the Repetition chapter?

Listen to Tim McGraw sing on his song-of-the-year, "Live Like You Were Dying." It's a classic example of a Verse-Chorus-Bridge song arc. His note choices in the verses are lower in pitch, followed by choruses that soar higher. And while the bridge starts low, it steadily builds until the final chorus explodes with emotion. The melody arc and the production of the instruments work in perfect tandem.


HIGH
Chorus
...
Chorus
Chorus
...
...
Bridge
Verse
Verse
LOW

Example: “Live Like You Were Dying” (Verse-Chorus-Bridge melody arc)

Some songs start out with the chorus first as in “High Hopes” by Panic! At The Disco. This format often works well for dance or high energy songs because they start right from the onset with the emotional high of the chorus.


HIGH
Chorus
Chorus
Chorus
Verse
Verse
Bridge 1
Bridge 2
Pre-Cho
Pre-Cho
LOW

Example: “High Hopes” (Chorus first melody arc)

As you can see, “High Hopes” gets adventurous melodically with two completely different bridges, but it holds true to that classic technique of hitting the highest notes in the chorus. Notice how the singer saves the lowest notes of the melody for the first pre-chorus. This allows the maximum emotional impact when the following chorus kicks in.

The point is that the melody should take us on a journey and have a structure that engages us emotionally and sonically. There should be a dynamic to the songwriting (and the production) that provides ups and downs for the listener—something that offers both the familiar and the new.

So, now that you understand what a melodic story arc is, let’s break down some of the key elements that will help you design an effective one.

Repeating Song Sections

The first task of the melody writer and songwriter is to provide enough repetition so that the listener begins to recognize familiar note patterns and repetitions within sections. But, learning the ins and outs of repeating entire sections is equally as important to the development of your song’s arc.

I have heard songs that have immensely interesting melodies, but there’s no repeated chorus to sing along to. Or, perhaps each section of the song is different and never quite returns to any memorable place. It might sound cool, but this can

leave the listener confused and lost. Worse, they might not know which emotion they should be feeling. Songs are a conversation between the audience and the singer. We want the audience to know what the singer is feeling. We want them feeling it, too.

Repetition of song sections is one of the key tools a songwriter has to give the listener emotional cues.

The Chorus

The chorus is where the title of the song is most often found. Lyrically, it's the place where the big idea of the song lives. Think about any concert you've attended. Each time the singer sings that big hooky chorus melody, the lighters come out and thousands sing along. They are all feeling the same thing in that moment! Now, that's powerful. It is helped along by the repeated chorus section. There's a phrase pro writers often use: "Don't bore us, get to the chorus." That illustrates just how important a repeated chorus is. In fact, many second song verses are half as long as the first, just so they can get back to the chorus more quickly!

When writing a chorus, it's all about balance. It's important to make sure the chorus melody supports that big lyrical idea and is hooky enough for your audience to sing along. Remember that the chorus music and lyrics will be repeated–over and over and over and over and over and over–throughout the song. So, your melody should be interesting enough to keep the listener's attention, and simple enough that it's memorable! This is not always easy to accomplish, but with a little practice using the techniques in this book, you can find the right balance to move the listener emotionally.

Most of us are very familiar with the concept of repeating a chorus section throughout a song. It's also effective to repeat other whole sections of a song.

Second Verses

Traditionally, the second verse of a song usually returns to the same melody established for the first verse. Lyrically, well-written songs tend to go deeper into the story for the second verse. So, it's useful to return to the established verse melody as a foundation of familiarity. Perhaps the second verse notes are embellished a bit, but they are rooted in the same base melody. This gives the listener another hooky ledge to hold on to and remember your song.

The Second Verse is the New Bridge

Composing a completely new second verse melody in a song, which does not follow the first verse melody, is a trend in mainstream pop music. This technique was born out of records having "features," meaning, a singer or band features another guest artist on their record. The main artist sings the lion's share of a song, but the featured artist enters at some point to rap or sing a new melody unrelated to any other section of the record.

As a result, many listeners have come to expect this variation, so much so that some solo artists write their own "feature" into a song, thus, singing a totally different melody in the second verse. It is almost as if this type of second verse acts as the new bridge. Note, the traditional second verse is removed with this technique.

If you experiment with this, remember that you will need enough “hooks” in the second verse to compensate for losing the repeated melodic symmetry between verses. It’s a good idea to keep the new verse short, so that the song returns quickly to a familiar chorus.

It is wise to learn to write traditional second verses before graduating to rule breaking. Mastering melody means having control and command over your skills. This level of skill will allow you to pick and choose which techniques are best for a song.

PRO TIP: More and more songs are hitting the top of the charts with extremely hooky verses. They almost feel chorus-like. The bar is set pretty high in today’s music to keep the hook factor going throughout your song. So, work on your verses to make them as memorable as possible. Don’t wait until the chorus to throw your hooks in. Sprinkle them throughout.

Pre-Choruses

Many classic songs have employed a device called the pre-chorus. It’s the section between your verse and chorus. Musically, it serves as a ramp-up from the verse melody to the chorus. It’s a real tension builder that propels the listener forward into the chorus. It also gives the songwriter more musical real estate to add additional lyrics and tell the story!

Pre-choruses are often melodically the same in both verses, but include a different lyric in the second verse. With my second hit single with Darius Rucker, “History In The Making,” we came up with a short, single line pre-chorus.

Baby, I've got a feelin'

Lyrically, we didn't need more than a single line, so we let that guide the melody. While writing the second verse, Darius thought the prior pre-chorus was exceptionally hooky. Along with our co-writer, Frank Rogers, we decided not only to repeat the same melody, but also, to repeat the lyric as well. Since it was a single line, it felt hooky. If it had been four lines, the song would have screamed for new lyrics.

Pre-choruses are fun sections of a song because there is a lot of flexibility for placement. Some songs leave the pre-chorus out of the second verse, but then, return to it later in the song as a pseudo bridge. Some songs use it only once in the first verse. I've even seen it return after the last chorus in the fade-out section of the recording. The thing to remember is you have a powerful tool with a pre-chorus to add an extra hook to your song.

*Word to the wise…I have heard songs repeat so much of the familiar that the listener becomes bored before they even reach the second verse. Trust me, even your mamma will struggle to listen through three minutes of this—and she loves you like no other!

Post-Chorus

The popularity of the post-chorus is perhaps one of the biggest changes to the arc in the last few decades. The post-chorus is the short section that follows after the chorus and before the second verse. It can be achieved by repeating your title in interesting rhythms and melodies—or by adding a sing-a-long chant like Na-Na-

Na-Na. It can have completely new words and melody. Think of it as a second chorus and a chance for your audience to sing or jam for a few more bars. Check out the post-chorus of Maroon 5's song "Girls Like You." If the concept of a post-chorus is new to you, take a moment to listen to the track as you read the words. You'll gain a better sense of how the post-chorus works.

Chorus:

'Cause girls like you

Run around with guys like me

'Til sundown, when I come through

I need a girl like you, yeah yeah

Girls like you

Love fun, yeah me too

What I want when I come through

I need a girl like you, yeah yeah

Post-Chorus:

Yeah yeah yeah

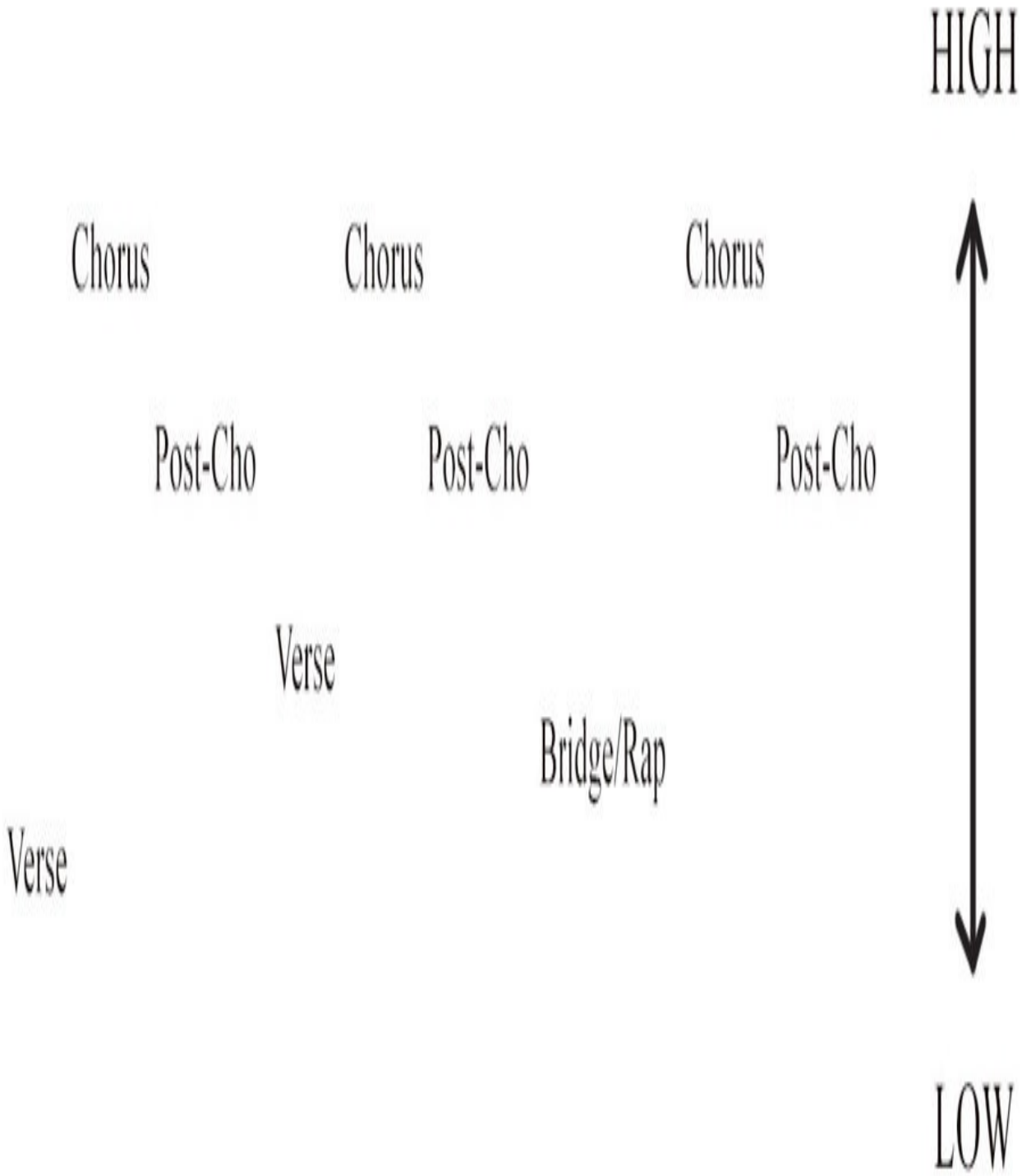
Yeah yeah yeah

I need a girl like you, yeah yeah

Yeah yeah yeah

Yeah yeah yeah

I need a girl like you, yeah yeah


HIGH
Chorus
Chorus
Chorus
Post-Cho
Post-Cho
Post-Cho
Verse
Bridge/Rap
Verse
LOW

Example: “Girls Like You” (Verse-Chorus-Post melody arc)

Opening Line Repetition Trick

A final repetition technique involves taking the opening line of a tune and repeating it at the very end of the song, so that it is the last thing the listener hears. It brings the listener full-circle. When used correctly, it will leave them feeling satisfied intellectually and emotionally.

Check out my song “She Thinks She Needs Me” sung by Andy Griggs. It is a perfect illustration of this book-end repetition. The song opens with the words She thinks I walk on water and uses the same line to end the song.

When repeating sections of a song, it’s important to trust our gut to find the balance between hooky and boring. The best balance is between the familiar and the new. First, we have to establish the familiar. Once we’ve drawn the listener in and given them something to recognize and return to, the next task is to create enough of the new to keep the listener interested and engaged. One important way to do this is to offer contrast between song sections.

Contrast Between Sections

Want to hold the listener’s interest? Let them know where they are in the song arc and story by generating enough contrast between sections.

If the verse provides fast-paced rhythms and short notes, perhaps the pre-chorus or chorus that follows the verses should stretch out a bit and the notes should be held longer.

Country singer-songwriter Thomas Rhett does this well in many of his songs. Listen to him sing “Unforgettable,” written by Thomas Rhett, Jesse Frasure, Ashley Gorley, and Shane McAnally. The verses and lyrics are fast-paced with a steady stream of short notes. At the pre-chorus, he stretches out a long note and lyric Wooooahhh.

This serves several purposes. First, it clues in the listener so they know they are in a new section: the pre-chorus. Secondly, it offers rhythmic contrast to the verse, and that holds their attention. Finally, it builds tension and propels the momentum forward.

Visualize these long-held notes in the pre-chorus as an archer pulling back the string of his bow. This creates enough tension so that when he has let go of the arrow, it springs forward. Much the same, an effective pre-chorus builds tension and, then, launches the listener into the chorus.

Even though the chords and guitar strum-pattern stay the same throughout much of the song, the rhythm of the words is sung differently enough in each section that the listener knows when the verse is over. They intuit that the song is going somewhere else right before the chorus. The listener also knows when the chorus comes in and repeats.

Together, these elements contributed to a compelling melody arc that propelled the song to the top twenty on the country charts, selling enough to be certified

Platinum.

Verse Melody vs. Chorus Melody

Another way to create a compelling melody arc is to use a smaller note range (low to high) in the verse, and then, let loose with a bigger, rangier chorus melody.

Over the decades, many hit songs have verse melodies with a very small note range (using only three or four notes). Why so few? Think of it this way. The job of the verse melody is to set the mood and tone of the song. That's it. You don't want to give too much away. It's kind of like going on a first date. You're making interesting conversation, but not spilling your whole life story in the first few minutes. You want to save a little mystery for following dates! If you compose a verse melody with a huge note range, then you have nowhere interesting to go when you hit the chorus. The best songs set up the chorus in a way that allows the listener to connect with the song's emotion. Whether you feel like crying or dancing, it's usually the chorus that tugs your heart the hardest. So, try starting your songs with a conversational verse melody, then introduce the big emotion in the chorus.

Check out the verse melodies of "Hello" by Adele or "Unforgettable" by Thomas Rhett. Both songs spend the majority of the verse hovering around a three-note melodic range.

In my Grammy-nominated song "Beautiful Mess," sung by Diamond Rio, the entire first two lines of each verse section are limited to only two notes! Or, listen to the opening melody of The Beatles singing "I Am The Walrus." The opening melodic sequence of the verse is also two notes. The most extreme version of this is the song "One Note Samba," written by Antônio Carlos Jobim.

Notice how far he stretches a single note through half of his verse.

Great writers understand that the job of the initial verse melody is to be conversational, to invite the listener in. Generally, they keep the melody less varied in the verses, and then, introduce a bigger melodic range in the chorus to create a compelling melodic arc.

Of course, there are always exceptions to this. Jazz standards often include the big lyrical idea in the verses and have a bridge, rather than a traditional chorus. So, the verses need a bigger melodic range. However, in verse/chorus style songs, when the listener arrives at the chorus, they should know it's the chorus. Not only because it repeats throughout the song, but also, because it has a certain energy that makes them want to sing along. This often means the chorus starts on a higher note and is sung in a higher range than the verses.

My co-author, Bill, was once pitching a song to a publisher. After listening through about half of the song, the publisher stopped and asked, "Which part is the chorus?" Bill began to answer, but the publisher stopped him to say, "If I have to ask, that means there isn't a chorus." That's a snarky way of teaching a lesson, but after that, Bill made sure he never presented a song where the listener couldn't identify the chorus.

The Right Margin Test

Another way to ensure contrast between and within song sections is to vary the line and word lengths. Look at the following verse-chorus example I've created here to make the point.

Verse:

I woke up this morning in Montana

The sky was dark and almost gray

I took it as a sign a storm's a comin'

Like when you know it's gonna rain

Chorus:

So if you're leaving go on and go

Don't think twice 'bout being kind

'Cause my heart'll hurt just the same

If you break it now or take your time

Notice how the right margin is pretty much a straight line all the way down the page: four verse lines all the same length followed by four chorus lines of the same length. Whenever I see this, it almost always means the melody will not have enough contrast between the verse and chorus. Every melody line will probably be the same length as well. Now, compare this to the old rock-n-roll classic, AC/DC's "Back In Black":

Verse:

Back in black, I hit the sack

I've been too long I'm glad to be back

Yes, I'm let loose from the noose

That's kept me hangin' about

I've been looking at the sky 'cause it's gettin' me high

Forget the hearse 'cause I never die

I got nine lives, cat's eyes

Abusin' every one of them and running wild

Chorus:

Cause I'm back

Yes, I'm back

Well, I'm back

Yes, I'm back

Well, I'm back, back

Well, I'm back in black

Yes, I'm back in black

When you listen to "Back In Black," the verse and chorus are melodically very different. Let's apply the "right margin test." The first clue is that the verse lines are much longer than the chorus lines. In fact, the song's melody has many short, rapid-fire notes in the verse, while the chorus notes are long-held on the word black. This is just the kind of contrast necessary to keep a listener's attention throughout the entire song arc. We know when this song hits the chorus because we experience a completely different melodic and rhythmic feel.

One of the common mistakes I see when coaching aspiring writers is that their

songs don’t pass the right margin test.

Put It into Practice
Pull out some of your favorite songs you have written. Now, look at your lyrics t

Starting the Song Sections or Lines on Different Beats

For contrast between song sections, start the vocal melody on different beats in different sections.

For example, if a song uses the most common time signature, 4/4, that means there are four beats to the measure. The verse melody may enter at beat one. To contrast, start your chorus melody before the first beat (often called “the pickup”). Or, start it on the half-beat between the first and second beats (on the “one and”). Or, on the second or third beat. Whatever feels right and different.

Many non-commercial songs have the vocal melody starting on the same beat in every section. Although a subtle point, this can make a song less interesting to the ear. Most professional songwriters do this intuitively, but they also deliberately change things when there is too much repetition in a song.

Put It into Practice
As you practice your Inspired Listening, tap and count along with the beat of the

Breakdown Choruses

Add contrast and flavor to your song arc by including a “breakdown chorus,” usually in the last part of the song. This involves playing or strumming less under your melody in the first part or in the whole chorus. Or, when producing the song, this involves dropping out some of the instruments that are a part of the previous choruses.

This changes the dynamics and signals the listener for a finale that comes in like gangbusters with full instrumentation. This is typically a musical arrangement device, but often can involve reworking or removing some of the lyric.

For instance, here is an example of a chorus I wrote with Marty Dodson and Joey Ebach:

Chorus:

No look back town

Once you break out

Man you don’t turn around

It’s all in my rearview now

It’s a no look back town

A no look back town

If I wanted to write a breakdown chorus, I could pull most of the backing instruments out of the track and simply repeat the first vocal line of the chorus a few times. I could insert some musical space between the two lines, and then, come back full strength with the entire backing track for the last chorus.

Breakdown:

No look back town

(Music space)

No look back town

(Music space)

Chorus:

No look back town

Once you break out

Man you don't turn around

It's all in my rearview now

It's a no look back town

A no look back town

The idea is to create tension before coming in with the final big chorus. Getting momentarily quiet in a song builds the kind of tension that signals the big chorus is coming. The calm before the storm. It's simply another way to add contrast and interest to your song arc.

PRO TIP: Each section of a song can have its own arc —especially choruses. Start noticing how stand-out songs develop choruses from start to finish. Many choruses start out with the first two lines having similar or identical melodies. Then, the third line might do something completely different like interval jumps before returning to the melody of the original lines for the conclusion of the chorus. This produces a chorus arc within the whole of the wider song arc.

There are many ways this can be accomplished. By practicing Inspired Listening, you will start incorporating new techniques into your own songs!

You Don’t Have to Know a Lot of Chords

One of the biggest complaints I hear from new songwriters is that they wish they knew more chords. When Bill started getting into songwriting sessions with professional writers, one thing that initially surprised him was they often used the same few chords throughout the song. Bill had been under the impression that to establish contrast between song sections, he had to incorporate a new set of chords for each section.

One day, Bill was co-writing with pro songwriter Keesy Timmer and brought in a title idea Keesy liked. So, he asked if Bill had any chord patterns in mind. So, he played a short series of chords that he had been messing around with. Keesy liked the groove, so they wrote a verse to those chords.

Then Bill asked, “Where shall we go for the chorus?” Keesy said, “same chords” and began singing an entirely different melody and melodic rhythm over the same chords. Bill was impressed. When they got to the bridge, he was sure that they would go somewhere else and find different chords. But, no, Keesy just had Bill play those same chords again to create yet a third melody and melodic

rhythm. Lesson learned!

I don’t tell you this to limit your creativity or desire to learn more about your craft. But, you should never let lack of formal training stop you from writing a classic now! There are many songs with two chords, even more with three chords and four chords. You don’t have to know hundreds of cool chords with minor flatted fifths and augmented elements—or be a prodigious player—to write interesting songs with variable melodies. However, you do have to use melody and rhythm to create contrast and keep your song arcs interesting.

Study the songs mentioned in the first chapter that only have a few chords. Learn how the pros use the limitation of few chords to their advantage.

Put It into Practice
Now that you know the many ways skilled songwriters create contrast between s

I always make a point to consciously listen to song arcs. I love to check out how other writers, musicians, and producers take their listeners on a journey. It's been said that in order to be a good leader, you must learn to be a good follower. So, allow yourself to go on the journey of good songs and pay attention to the details of the arc along the way.

One final thought on melody arcs. While they do encompass song structure (verse-chorus-bridge, etc.), they go beyond that. Melody arcs use structure as one element of the emotional intensity map of the song. Note selection, chords, and rhythm patterns are additional components in the total equation.

Chapter 3 RECAP: Arc

Arc is the musical and emotional journey of a song—the rise and fall of melodic intensity over the course of an entire tune.

Melodic contrast between sections is vital for building an effective arc and keeping the listener engaged.

It is not necessary to know a plethora of chords to build an effective arc.

Studying arcs from classic and modern songs will quickly develop good instincts for building your own arcs.

Part 2

Fine Tune-ing

Your Melodic Sense

Chapter 4

Developing Melodic Flexibility and Skills

Though many songwriters edit their lyrics to improve them, as a mentor and teacher, I find songwriters new to the craft often hang onto the first melody that comes.

News flash: your first melodic take may not be your best.

My rule of thumb: if a melody feels like it's been done before, by either me or someone else, I keep pushing until I create something that excites me and feels fresh. I never settle. Period.

It's easy as a writer to get stuck in the rut of using the same ol' chords, rhythms, and melodies. By using the techniques in Mastering Melody Writing, you can experiment with different ways to phrase melody lines and break free of any rut. One of my early mentors, Rich Berg, offered the best advice: "Dare to suck." Those words (in his colorful NYC accent and attitude) gave me the confidence to experiment and try ideas without worrying if they were good or bad. This mindset allowed me to discover better ideas more often.

Put It into Practice-"Dare to Suck"

Take a chorus melody from one of your songs that you think could be more insp

With the tools you have already learned in this book, you can now begin to edit your melodies just like you would your lyrics. If, after making any of these changes, you decide you still like the first version best: no harm, no foul. You can always go back to the original. But, more often than not, I think you'll uncover a better melody by experimenting. This can make the difference between an okay song and one people can't stop singing!

Did you know country legend Hank Williams used to take an existing song and write new lyrics to it? Then, he would take those new lyrics and write a completely new melody. The new song was entirely his, but it had the ghostly bones of some previous hit song or a song he loved.

I've used this same re-writing exercise in my SongTown MasterClasses for eight years—and it's made a huge impact on my students' melody writing prowess. It's a great way to get more flexible with your melodies. It teaches you to come at a melody from different angles and break free of ruts when you feel stuck—especially if you re-write the melodies to famous songs that are engrained in your head.

Let's be experimental. Try a few of these flexibility building exercises. Don't worry about writing a masterpiece. It's about getting into top melody writing shape for the next time you have a writing session or get inspired.

Put It into Practice
Take a famous song—one where you know the lyric and melody inside out—and

Don’t Marry Your Melodies

Simply put: don’t marry the first melody (or even the second melody) that finds you.

Professional songwriters often try several different lyrics and melodies before they settle on a final one.

Ego and attachment are secondary to whatever makes the song better. Develop the ability to detach from your melodies enough to try new variations, especially if they make the song better or more hooky.

Grab Hooky Melody Patterns from Your Lyric

When writing a melody to a lyric, one of your chief jobs is to make that lyric stand out and be memorable. Let’s write an opening lyrical line to a fictional song…

I remember waking up, thinking that I’d had enough of the bad stuff

Now, we could sing these words as one long continuous line, right? But instead, let’s look at some clues the words give us.

Look for rhyming words

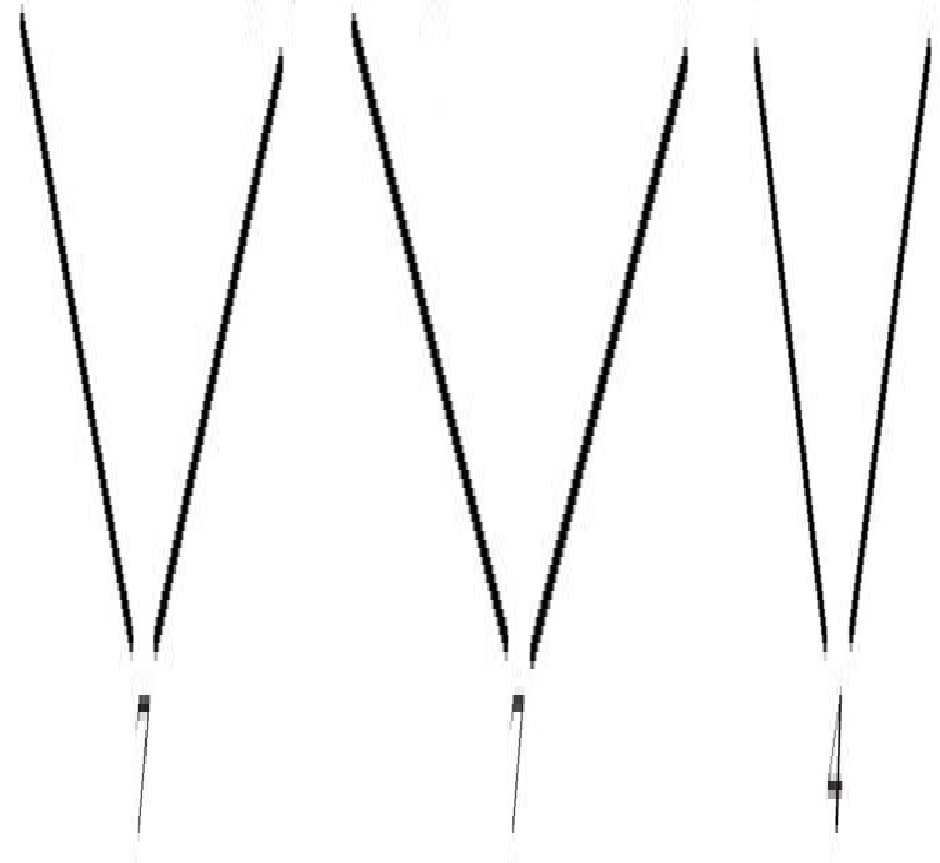
When pulling melody clues from a lyric, the first thing I look for are internal rhymes. We have three words here that rhyme with each other.

I remember waking up thinking that I'd had e-nough of the bad stuff

Break it into parts

Now, look for ways to break the lyric line into bit-sized parts with at least two parts having an equal number of syllables.

I remember waking up / thinking that I'd had enough / of the bad stuff



In this example, I've divided the line into two sections of seven syllables and a single section of four. I love that each of the sections end with a rhyme word. This creates nice Hotspots to play with.

At this point, I can compose a melodic/rhythmic pattern on the first seven syllables for the words: I remember waking up. Once I've established this pattern, I can repeat it identically on the second seven syllables. Instantly, this becomes a hook making the line more memorable than if I'd simply sung it all the way through as one continuous line. Finally, I'm left with the last four syllables that will resolve the melody line in a different way.

Now you will notice that the first two rhyme words up and enough have the same exact melody note. Putting the same melody on rhymes creates more hookiness—perhaps I'll include an interval jump upward on the words up and 'nough. By taking the melody up on the word up, we use a technique I call Word Painting. More hookiness! (More on Word Painting later.)

Look for patterns of 3. Can you do Line+3?

1 - 2 - 3 1 - 2 - 3

I remember wa-king up / thinking that I'd had e-nough /of the bad stuff

So, by altering the melody to take advantage of Line+3, we gain an additional technique to make this line sticky. Let's take a look at all of the hooks:

Repeated melody pattern on the “7” sections

Repeated rhythmic pattern on the “7” sections

Same melody note on the first two rhyming words

Word Painting

Line+3 technique

Do you see that breaking down a lyric line into bite-sized patterns frees your melody to elevate to the next level? This creates a powerful marriage of words and melody. The best part is, it’s all there hiding inside the lyric waiting to be found. You just have to learn to recognize it!

Put It into Practice
Review the opening lyric line to one of your existing songs, then ask yourself: d

Blend Genres

Don’t be afraid to blend and bend genres. Ray Charles began his legendary career by blending R&B lyrics with churchy Gospel-feeling rhythms. The world had never heard this before.This genre blending launched Ray into super-stardom! Run DMC combined their rap sensibilities with rockers Aerosmith on “Walk This Way.” The result was so powerful that it revived Aerosmith’s career for another decade of hits. Michael Jackson brought legendary guitarist Eddie Van Halen into the studio to play a finger-tapping rock guitar solo on his classic pop song “Beat It.” This helped Michael tap into a whole new fan base and widen his appeal. More recently rapper Lil Nas X and country singer Billy Ray Cyrus combined their talents on the huge smash “Old Town Road.” Music history is filled with stories of artists blending genres. It’s a technique that won’t go out of style anytime soon.

Co-write with Great Melody Writers

There’s a saying that if you are the smartest person in the room then you’ll never learn anything. When I got my first publishing deal as a staff writer, I knew melody came naturally to me. But, some sessions I’d be asked to co-write with a recording artist who didn’t write lyrics. I was expected to supply lyrics on the spot! So, I knew I had to improve my lyric game, and quickly. I had to conjure myself into a hit lyricist.

One of the first things I did was get into the co-writing room with exceptional lyricists. I paid attention to the things they focused on. I could see first-hand what made Tia Sillers a Grammy-winning lyricist. I watched her build words in a chorus that could hit you in the gut and make you cry. I got to see how Hall of Fame writer Rory Bourke approaches writing a second verse differently than the

first.

I didn’t start out writing with those great writers, but I worked my way into those rooms little by little over time. The better my songwriting skills got, the better my co-writers got. I learned how to do the thing I wanted to do by surrounding myself with people who were better than me. I eventually learned to write hit lyrics to compliment my melodic abilities.

You can grow your melody writing skills beyond your wildest expectations with the same approach. Trust me, in time, it will rub off. We often hear that in order to master a skill, it takes 10,000 hours. Think about it—when you co-write, you also reap the benefits of your co-writer’s 10,000 hours as well! We share our expertise and experience with our co-writers and vice-versa. Light bulbs will go off and you’ll speed up your learning curve tenfold. You’ll want to pay special attention to how great melody writers mentally approach their craft.

If you are new to co-writing, joining a community of writers who co-write has many advantages. Most of our members in SongTown co-write together and are extremely supportive of each other. Even folks who don’t live in the same town or country co-write via the internet with tools like Zoom, FaceTime, or Google Hangouts.

If you are in a town with a local writer’s nights and you hear a great melody person performing, go up and introduce yourself. Ask if they ever co-write. It’s hard to learn in a vacuum. The bottom line is you will learn faster by working with talented people.

Build Confidence as a Melody Writer

Confidence is crucial to great melody writing. How do we build our confidence? How do we get into a rhythm and keep it flowing?

Write on a regular basis

Whether you feel inspired or not, write! When you are uninspired and still plant your butt in the chair, you often will be struck with new melody ideas. Think of it as sitting and inviting the muse to join you.

Glenn Frey of The Eagles wrote some of the most iconic tunes of all time. His writing partner and Hall of Fame writer, Jack Tempchin, shared with me how they would work on their songs. Jack would arrive at Glenn's house. Glenn would light candles in the writing room to invite the muse to join them. He was confident that the muse would offer inspiration if they were patient. Even if he had zero ideas, he believed the inspiration would come. And, it did, over and over. The Eagles sold more albums that any American band in history and wrote some legendary songs.

So, Glenn obviously knew a thing or two about being creative. You can't achieve that level of confidence without putting in the work. Sit your butt in the chair enough times and the muse will see that you mean business!

Practice the Talk/Sing Method

I mentioned this early in Mastering Melody Writing, but I can't think of a better way to build confidence than with the Talk/Sing Method. Practicing this method will develop quick reflexes for hearing words, and then, turning them into

melody. Remember, there is no right or wrong. You'll experience a sense of melodic freedom when you start turning words into any melodic emotion that strikes you. It's like practicing guitar scales for songwriters. You want it to become automatic. As I move through my day, I do this any chance I get.

Spend Time Spitballing

In country writing rooms, many sessions begin with a lyrical hook or title. The Talk/Sing Method is perfect for learning to quickly turn a title or phrase into the right melody and emotion. But, in the pop world, melody reigns supreme. Often writers will spitball melodies first and figure out the lyric later in the writing process—sometimes even after the complete melody is written. The main focus is finding the hookiest melody first.

So what is spitballing? Let's say you have an eight or sixteen bar chord pattern that you've recorded and looped on your computer. You grab a microphone, press the record button, and begin to improvise whatever melodies come out. At this point, you are not worried about what words you're singing. You might hum, mumble sounds, or sing whatever words you feel—even if they are nonsense words. Remember the Phil Collins song "Sussudio?" The story goes that Phil spitballed his melody in the studio on a vocal mic over an instrumental music track they had completed earlier. As they listened back to the vocal track, they loved the melody.

There's this girl that's been on my mind

All the time

Su-Sussudio

Now she don't even know my name

But I think she likes me just the same

Su-Sussudio

He had sung the nonsense syllables susudio with the idea to later replace them with actual words. When repeated attempts to produce those words failed, they thought “what the heck. It sounds good. It’s fun. Let’s keep it!” And, a classic, nonsense syllable song was born.

Certainly every song can’t be nonsense lyrics, so spitballing requires awareness of any words or phrases that fall out in the creative process. They often give clues to what the song wants to be about and can serve as a starting point for fashioning a complete, cohesive lyric later in the process.

Today, many contemporary artists, from pop’s The Weekend to country music’s Sam Hunt, use this technique in their creative process. In spitballing, the melody takes precedent. It must feel good and always sound natural. The phrases should sound to the listener as if they were created effortlessly. The hard trick is sounding like it was easy!

Put It into Practice
Take an 8 or 16 bar phrase and loop it for 2 minutes. Begin with trying to find a

PRO TIP: Try not to overthink the spitballing process. Melody comes from an instinctual place.

Get feedback from people you trust

Playing your songs for people who have expertise—and who will be honest with you—is invaluable to building your confidence. A good mentor is crucial to your writing progress. I was blessed early in my journey to have a few successful writers take me under their wing. They saw I had talent, a passion for writing, and worked hard. They would share their advice and often make suggestions for how to improve my songs. Sometimes it was just an "atta-boy." Man, did that help my confidence! That's what we try to do every day at SongTown. We pass down years of songwriting knowledge to help aspiring writers of all ages and backgrounds become their best songwriter-selves. And, it's as rewarding for me to see one of my SongTown members have success as it is to see my own name on the Billboard charts. We all keep the art of songwriting alive and thriving. Together.

Put more tools in your toolbox

Try showing up to play a golf tournament knowing you only have one club in your bag. No matter how talented you are, it's tough to have a shot at winning without all the tools you need. The same is true in songwriting. If you are a one trick pony, your melodies will become stale and boring. You won't feel inspired and neither will the audiences listening to your songs. However, by learning new techniques and consistently adding tools to your toolbox, you will gain the confidence to write from a more inspired place. I can't tell you how cool it is to see my students get excited when they use a new tool in their writing. Here's a

moving email I got from Nick Caiano after a recent MasterClass I taught:

“My mind was blown by the Line+ concept in last night’s class. I’m a Berklee music grad and have been making my living as a session musician/recording engineer/teacher for the last 30 years. And, how I didn’t know about this formula makes me feel like a total amateur. To make a long story even longer (bah dah bum), I was at the gym this morning on the “redundant” bike listening to the music they were pumping into the gym. Lo and behold, a stream of Line+3 came at me like gangbusters! Damn….Mind Blown…Super inspired.”

Now, this is the kind of excitement that comes from learning! It makes writing so much more fun—and it builds confidence.

Chapter 4 RECAP: Developing Melodic Flexibility and Skills

Don’t marry your melodies.

Grab hooky melody patterns from your lyric.

Blend genres.

Co-write with great melody writers.

Build confidence as a melody writer.

Chapter 5

Clay's Essential Tools

Over the course of your songwriting journey, you will grow and add many new tools to your toolbox. So far, Mastering Melody Writing has laid out new techniques to show you how to be your own life-long teacher with practices like Inspired Listening and the Talk/Sing Method. Now, I want to share with you a few essential tools that have helped me write better songs over the years. It's fun to think of these in terms of what you find in a carpenter's toolbox. What can I say? I spent my childhood summers on a farm in the Mississippi Delta!

Angle Tool

Use: for approaching your songs from different angles when you get stuck

We've all experienced the frustration of having part of a song come in a flash– and then nothing. Crickets. We were on a cool ride, and hit a wall in figuring where to take the song next. Perhaps it's the chorus that comes quickly, but the verse sounds boring or uninspired, right?

In the early stages of learning to write songs, I had a habit of getting stuck. And worse, after getting stuck, I would focus so intently on the problem that I couldn't see the answer. I had not learned yet how to step back from my song and come at it from a fresh angle.

Years later when I finally worked my way into the room with accomplished writers, I saw how easily these writers were able to turn a corner at a sticking point—to come at the problem with a new approach and keep the song moving along. They understood the flow of the writing room.

The good news is there are countless techniques for getting unstuck, but they all fall under the umbrella of the Angle. Here are a few things to keep in mind while developing your tools.

Treat Your Songwriting Like a Grand Experiment

A quote that profoundly impacted on my own writing is from Tunesmith by Hall of Fame songwriter Jimmy Webb. Jimmy's mentor, Michael Bennet, smiled as they entered a writing room and said, "In this room, you can never make a mistake." Until that point I had never thought about creativity in such freeing terms. We should give ourselves total freedom and permission to try ANYTHING! And, then, to keep trying options until we find the right one.

I remember a friend playing me some out-takes from an old Beatles' recording session. I was shocked how one of the most influential bands of all-time would freely experiment with their songs. They would take a classic-to-be into the studio and try different tempos, chord substitutions, or even different time signatures, before landing on the version ultimately immortalized on vinyl. The songs didn't need to come to them in their final form. They searched and experimented until it was right.

Step Back From the Problem

If you find yourself getting stuck or frustrated, take a deep breath and do something else. Take a walk, exercise, work on another song. After a break, come back and play your song from the beginning to see where it leads you. It's like you have a new set of ears.

Try a Different Groove or Tempo

I can't tell you how many times I've written a verse melody and lyric, and after working so hard, I'm still not feeling it. At this point, I'll try a completely different groove under my lyric. This can lead to some amazing results.

I learned this cool trick from Hall of Fame writer Mike Reid, who wrote some of my all-time favorite songs. The story goes that Mike and his co-writer, Alan Shamblin, had been stuck on an up-tempo bluegrass song for months. One day Mike was playing his piano and the solution hit him. He took the lyrics and melody from the uptempo bluegrass song and started playing a ballad groove below it. A total 180° from the original groove. That song became the huge pop smash, "I Can't Make You Love Me," recorded by legendary artists Bonnie Raitt, George Michael, and Prince!

Drum loops work well for inspiring new melody angles, too. Sometimes I'll sing along to an iPhone drum machine app called iMaschine trying new beats. Simply changing the tempo of your beat to faster or slower can lead the song in a new direction.

Switch Instruments

Another way to unstick yourself is to switch instruments as you are writing Often, I start a song on guitar, and then, switch to piano or vice versa. Different instruments evoke different feelings and emotions, especially if you write predominantly on one particular instrument. We all fall prey to ruts and hanging out where we're most comfortable. Don't worry if you can't play a certain instrument well. Often, this is a plus! Mistakes can lead us to new and wonderful melodies.

Hand Saw

Use: for editing and sawing off entire sections of a song

One issue I run into over and over in my mentoring sessions is how easy it is to write songs that are way tooooooooooooo looooooooooong. If your song has a third verse—one that puts it over five minutes and simply rehashes the second verse lyric idea—get rid of the extra verse.

Don't Bore Us, Get to the Chorus

Why not? It's the part of the song your audience loves to sing along to! Today, songs are slanted toward the chorus. So, let's look at one way to use your saw. Below is a verse and chorus lyric to a top five song of mine "She Thinks She Needs Me," recorded by Andy Griggs:

Verse 1

She thinks I walk on water

She thinks I hung the moon

She tells me every morning

They just don't make men like you

She thinks I got it together

Swears I'm tough as nails

But I don't have the heart to tell her

She don't know me that well

Chorus

She don't know how much I need her

She don't know I'd fall apart

Without her kiss, without her touch

Without her faithful loving arms

She don't know it's all about her

She don't know I can't live without her

She's my world, she's my everything

And she thinks she needs me

Notice that the first verse has eight lines, and then, the chorus begins. When we

originally wrote this song, we had a second verse with another eight lines. However, after playing and singing the entire song, we felt the second verse took too long to return to the chorus. So, we reached for our tool belt and sawed the second verse music and lyrics in half.

Here's what happened:

Verse 2

Sometimes she cries on my shoulder

When she's lyin' next to me

She don't know that when I hold her

She's really holding me, holding me

Chorus

She don't know how much I need her

She don't know I'd fall apart

Without her kiss, without her touch

Without her faithful loving arms

She don't know it's all about her

She don't know I can't live without her

She's my world, she's my everything

She thinks she needs me

At first, it might feel like you're butchering your song or ripping out a part of you. It can be hard to let go of words and music that you've poured your heart into. But, we have a saying in Nashville…

The song is king.

We always do what is best for the song and what gives the song its best chance of impacting the listener. In fact, our original bridge to "She Thinks She Needs Me" contained four lines of words and melody. My publisher challenged my co-writers, Shane Minor and Sonny Lemaire, and me to say the same thing in one line! So, our one-line bridge turned out much better than our original four-liner, which wandered into unnecessary territory.

Bridge

Funny thing is, she thinks she's the lucky one…

Chorus

She don't know how much I need her

She don't know I'd fall apart

Without her kiss, without her touch

Without her faithful loving arms

She don't know it's all about her

She don't know I can't live without her

She's my world, she's my everything

She thinks she needs me

X-Acto Knife

Use: for eliminating unnecessary notes and tightening your rhythm patterns

The X-Acto Knife is similar to the Hand Saw; however, it's used to make smaller, finer cuts. For instance, let's say your song has a hooky rhythmic pattern in the chorus that is established on the opening line:

May your joy -be- unspeakable

Then, you realize the rhythm of the next line of your lyric is 90% the same. But, you have more syllables in the second lyric line…so, you add a few extra melody notes to accommodate the lyric:

And your love always be undeniable

Time to break out the X-Acto knife and start trimming the excess. Let's cut away the two words always and be. You've established a hooky rhythm in the first line, so go ahead and repeat that X-Act goodness in the second line:

May your joy -be- unspeakable (1,2,3 - 4 - 5,6,7,8)

And your love -un- deniable (1,2,3 - 4 - 5,6,7,8)

Now each line has the same number of syllables (8) and the same hooky rhythm. This creates symmetrical patterns. Repetition is ear-candy. The new edited lyric rolls off the tongue in a more musical way. The goal is to write clear melodic or rhythmic hooks and not muddy the waters with extraneous notes.

Paint Brush

Use: to amplify a lyric's meaning by mirroring it with music.

Word Painting is one of the most under-utilized devices for injecting hookiness in a song. It fills the gap between music and words, marrying the two, so to speak.

Over the years I've heard Word Painting called a few different names to describe this musical illumination of words, such as Tone Painting in the classical community or Prosody in poetry circles. However, none of these names fully encompass the art of bringing a lyric to life by reflecting it with music and/or melody.

To me, Word Painting is coloring the emotion, action, or natural sounds of a lyric with its musical counterpart.

It's a device that has been around for centuries dating back to the Gregorian

chants. It’s found its way into every modern genre from rock, rap, jazz, and country.

When they go low, you go low…

Take a listen to Garth Brooks singing “I’ve Got Friends In Low Places.” The most fun part of the whole chorus is when Garth sings the word low. The melody dips down the octave and hits an extremely low note on the word low. The melody is literally doing what the word says when Garth drops low on the word low.

The same effect is used on Elvis’s last hit of his career, “Way On Down.” At the end of each chorus when the King sings way on down, the melody goes way down as he hits the low note on the word down.

On the classic Joe Cocker hit “Love Lift Us Up,” you can guess what the melody does right? It starts lifting up and up for those words.

With Word Painting, you have countless ways to enhance the emotion or action of a lyric through music and melody.

Parody the Lyric

I remember Katy Perry talking about the writing process of her smash single “Roar.” She said the song was near completion, but they knew they didn’t have a

hit yet. The song needed a big hook in the chorus to send it over the top. She said they spent days in the studio just working on one small section of the song trying to make the title grab the listener's attention. Finally, after a week, it hit them: Katy needed to make her voice scoop up on the word roar. This mimicked exactly the sound scoop a lion makes when he roars. Go take a listen to the song if you haven't heard it. Adding this simple device transformed "Roar" into a very memorable song!

The Boomerang

Check out Justin Timberlake's Word Painting on his hit song, "What Goes Around." In the chorus, he sings descending notes, stepping down the octave on the words what comes around, comes around, comes around.

And then, he starts ascending back up the scale on the words comes back around.

He repeats the whole phrase over and over…the music paints the words for a full circle boomerang effect using nothing but his choice of melody notes!

Just Roll with It

"One Man Band" is one of my favorite songs by the band Old Dominion. The chorus of their song begins this way:

I don't wanna be a one man band

I don’t wanna be a rolling stone, alone

When lead singer Mathew Ramsey sings the words rolling stone, alone, notice how the melody becomes a rolling series of notes, almost like rolling waves. You feel these words on a deeper level because the music imitates the exact emotion of the words. By the way, did you catch the use of Line+3 in the chorus?

1- 2- 3

I don’t wanna be a…. one-man-band

Can I Get an Amen?

“Hallelujah,” by Leonard Cohen, is one of the most covered songs in the world. It is a highly developed example of Word Painting, using minor and major chords where the lyric calls for it.

It goes like this the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall and the major lift,

the baffled king composing hallelujah

Let’s break it down…

The fourth: these two words sit atop the fourth chord of the scale.

The fifth: the melody moves up one note and the lyrics sit above the fifth chord of the scale.

The minor fall: these words sit on the sixth chord of the scale, which is a minor chord. The fall in this phrase refers to the "fallen" or lowered third, which defines a minor chord. It's a sadder sounding chord as well, which sets up nicely…

The major lift: the "lift" refers to the chord changing from a minor chord to a major one. It gives the feeling of "lifting" the harmony. There is only one note that changes between the minor and major chords. This happens when you lift the third note of the chord.

So, as you can see, Word Painting can be as simple or complex as you make it. The end result should always be the same, though: Hook Magic.

Reverse Word Painting

One of the dangers of learning new techniques is developing the tendency to think they are absolute rules that can't be broken. In fact, doing the opposite of what the lyric is saying can be even more effective. Check out the smash "Pumped Up Kicks" by the American band Foster The People. Their lyric tackles the dark subject of a kid contemplating a school shooting. Yet, the music is pure bubble-gum pop. This is an example where Reverse Word Painting is absolutely the best way to broach a dark storyline. Can you imagine if the music was as dark as the lyric? It would be hard to imagine many people sitting through an entire song of that. With their reverse approach, though, they are able to bring the message of the song to the masses. Difficult subjects often benefit from this reverse technique.

Groove Painting

Bruce Springsteen is a master of this technique. Check out his song “I’m On Fire” from the Born in the USA album. It utilizes what drummers call a “train beat” throughout (one, two, one, two, three, four). The drums sound like a train chugging down the tracks. So, what does The Boss do in the third verse of “I’m On Fire”? He writes a lyric line about a train. It’s almost certainly by design because the first two-thirds of the lyric make no mention of trains, but in this verse, it’s a brilliant way to glue the music and words together by Word Painting.

At night I wake up with the sheets soaking wet And a freight train running through the middle of my head

Springsteen takes Word Painting a step further at the end of the song when he uses his voice to simulate a train whistle…

Woo ooh ooh

Woo ooh ooh

Ooh ooh ooh

Woo ooh ooh

Woo ooh ooh

As you practice your daily routine of Inspired Listening, pay attention to how melody, production, groove, and chords wrap themselves around a lyric. How

does melody paint the emotion of the lyric you are listening to? How does music bring words to life?

▪

Put It into Practice
When discovering a new tool, it’s important to put it into practice immediately w

The Level

Use: for checking your song to ensure it will matter to an audience

When we write, it normal to experience an initial creative burst. It's very exciting. Music and words fly out like they're coming from someone else. Maybe they are just handed to us? But then there comes a point in each song's development when it is necessary to step back and level with yourself. Ask, "Other than myself, who is going to care about this song?" After all, songs are a conversation between the singer and the audience. Whenever your songs are performed, you want the audience to feel the same emotions you felt when writing it.

In pro circles, we call it the give-a-hoot factor. (Well, our language may or may not be more colorful than the word hoot!)

The level is a tool I use in EVERY writing session, whether I am writing solo or co-writing. Over the years, I've developed my own checklist of things to look for. It works well for both lyric and melody writing.

Is the idea I'm writing unique and interesting? Or has it been written this way before?

Does the melody seem fresh? Or does it sound like 1983 called and wants their song back?

Does the chorus melody have an emotional arc? Does it rise and fall throughout the song or does it stay on the same uneventful four notes for the entire song?

Is the verse melody conversational enough to draw in the listener? Or is the melody too big in the verse causing my chorus emotion to fall flat?

Are there enough melodic/rhythmic hooks in the verse? In the chorus? Are the hooks different enough in each section to keep it interesting?

Do my chord progressions and groove create the right emotion to support the lyric? Or have I thrown a distracting complex chord in the middle of the verse that sounds more clever than believable?

Your Level tool will change and develop as you progress as a writer. At first, it may be a bit more challenging to learn how to use this tool, but it's vital to start asking the question each time you write: "Who else is gonna care about this?"

Stepping back from your song allows you to see what is not working and, then, to figure out how to fix it. Put yourself in the listener's shoes as if you are hearing the song for the very first time. Practice this and your songs will get better.

Writing Ahead of the Curve: Or, If You're Not the Lead Dog, the Scenery Never Changes.

Staying current is one of the biggest hurdles we writers face. In my mentoring sessions, it's not unusual to hear songwriters lamenting that publishers say their songs sound dated. When I dig deeper, I find they are chasing the latest thing on the radio. Here is the problem with this approach. What's playing on the radio

today typically has been written one or two years ago. Sometimes even longer! So, constantly chasing the latest trend will put you behind the times. It's one thing to sound classic or timeless, but sounding dated is not going to inspire modern artists to record your songs.

So, how do we stay ahead of the curve as writers? Here are the main things I've done in my own writing to remain relevant over a few decades.

First, rather than trying to sound like the latest thing, I practice Inspired Listening. This helps build confidence. That confidence feeds everything I do as a writer. If I pick up one or two new tools I can use in my writing every week, that's a lot of tools. Imagine your skill level after a few years of this!

Secondly, I try to write the very best song I can every time I sit down to write. The song is king. I focus 95% of my energy on this, rather than chasing trends. If I am gathering new tools from songs around me, I will be current. Ultimately, I want to create quality songs.

Thirdly, I try to co-write with the very best writers around me. Record companies are a little bit behind what goes on in the real writing rooms. They put out today what great writers wrote yesterday. Songwriters are the front line of creation! Surrounding yourself with the best co-writers provides a sense of camaraderie and, often, a community. It fosters an environment where you can take chances and makes it easier for you to do things that have not been done before. Never underestimate the power of supportive co-writers, publishers, or friends. They can make or break your creative flow.

Finally, I find I write my best when I'm writing as often as I can. It keeps all of my skills sharpened. Then, when a great stroke of inspiration hits, I can write a killer song because I'm ready. Even if it's only possible for you to write for

fifteen minutes today, your songs will thank you.

Do you see a pattern emerging?

Listen, learn, write. Eat, sleep, repeat.

Chapter 6

Hooks, Ear Candy, and Emotion: Bringing It All Together

The Three Rs: Rhythm, Rhyme, and Repetition

In Mastering Melody Writing, I refer to the songs we like as being hooky. Those are the songs we wake up singing from a concert the night before. This book has provided a diverse set of tools, principles, and ideas to make your songs hooky and more compelling so your listeners will want to hear them again and again. I know we've covered a lot of territory in this book. If I had to boil everything down to the simplest summary, I would just say this: master rhythm, rhyme, and repetition in your songwriting.

Rhythm

We've just skimmed the surface of lyrics, but rhyme married to rhythm and melodic repetition can make your songs stick in your listener's head.

Most people think of melody as the pitch of the notes but, for me, the rhythmic pattern of the notes is as important as note pitches. Rhythm is so basic to us as humans. We begin in our mother's wombs hearing the rhythm of her heartbeat. Rhythms surround us as we move through our day. And, in fact, many songwriters write to beats and tracks now, since they've become relatively easy

to create on computer recording programs, tablets, and phones. These beats can inspire melodies and offer a framework for creating rhythmic lyrics and tunes.

Rhyme

The primary focus of this book has been melody. However, melody is sound—and, words and rhymes are part of the sound. So, as writers, learning to marry the right words with the right music will impact your listeners on a deeper level. You can add power to your lyrics by marrying rhymes to certain melodic patterns.

Start paying attention to how vowel sounds affect the mood of the song. Open vowels and darker vowels are comforting: “Hold On” or “Lost In Your Arms.” By contrast, bright vowels are uplifting and can make us smile…“Let There Be Peace On Earth.” “Ow” sounds make us want to “Twist & Shout” or “Shout It From a Mountain” with happiness! Remember, there are no absolute rules—and always exceptions—but start noticing the patterns. You’ll become a more in tune and thoughtful songwriter.

Think about it: melody rhymes just like lyrics do. It’s hard to separate the two when writing a great song.

Work on matching certain melodic patterns with certain rhyme patterns and sounds to make your songs hookier and more emotionally impactful.

Repetition

Repeated melodic patterns do something to the human brain so that it gets hooked on the sound.

My co-author Bill's family used to play a game on long car trips. They would each try to sing a song that was so addictive melodically that the others couldn't get it out of their heads. Singing Sugar, sugar, da, da, da, da, da, da, honey, honey, do, do, do, do, do, do You are my candy girl or it's a small world after all is all it took to drive them mad. Late at night after one of these games, one of them would whine, "I can't get to sleep, that song keeps playing over and over in my head." That is the power of melody. Good ones get stuck in our heads. These songs almost always have a lot of melodic repetition in them.

One of my songwriter friends co-wrote a song recorded by country star Blake Shelton called "Doing it To Country Songs." That line is repeated about 30 times in the three and half minute song. It works well and makes you smile.

Think also of the Bruce Springsteen song "Born In The USA." I'll bet you can't sing most of the verses in that song, but almost everyone who has heard it more than once or twice can sing the chorus, which repeats the title many times.

If you want a song to get stuck in your listener's head, use repetition wisely. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes it is overused and we can lose the listener, so find a balance between repeating and introducing new elements or varying the repeated parts.

Lifelong Melody Learning

The first time I got to co-write with a great songwriter, I was in my thirties and thought I knew a lot about songwriting! I mean, I had secured a staff writer deal with world-renowned publishing house EMI Music. My song-plugger arranged for me to write with Hall of Fame songwriter Rory Burke, who by that time had a slew of #1 songs. I walked into the writing room and Rory told me he had just finished taking a songwriting class. I thought I heard incorrectly and asked, "You're teaching it, right?" I was surprised when Rory said he was a student in the course! He wanted to keep learning and getting better at his craft. He taught me a valuable lesson that day: great writers are lifelong learners.

Paul Simon, long after he had written many hits, continued to take guitar lessons. We know that his songs reach far beyond the folk music style where he began. Though his songs remained commercial and pop-style, they began incorporating more interesting and complex chord patterns, melodies, and rhythms.

Remember when I mentioned that thinking of yourself as a corporation (as John Mayer did) is a good way to grow as a songwriter? Rory Burke and Paul Simon also embrace this attitude and have garnered even more success and longevity as songwriters.

I suggest the same attitude for you: be a lifelong learner as a songwriter. Train your intuition to write melodies using all of these principles. Go beyond what you know now to use the methods and techniques here in Mastering Melody Writing. And, keep discovering new tools as you journey!

Once you begin to raise your awareness of pattern, repetition, and arc in song melodies, you should begin to notice these elements so that you can emulate and incorporate them into your own songwriting. Don't worry if it takes some time to grasp these principles. Mastering melody writing is a noble pursuit.

A Case Study: Lady Gaga's "A Million Reasons"

"A Million Reasons" by Lady Gaga is a good case study for Mastering Melody Writing principles. The song, co-written by Gaga, Nashville hit songwriter Hillary Lindsay, and hit pop songwriter/producer Mark Ronson, was certified platinum and a top ten song in charts all over the world. The verses are both rhythmic melodically and relatively flat melodically. Most of the verse lines consist of only a single note. Remember, I call this a conversational verse melody.

She raises the last note of each line to place her end lyrical rhymes (go/show, hills/still, stare/aware, mean/believe) making the verses more hooky. In raising that one note up, the word is emphasized.

The lines also have a lot of repetition, both melodically and lyrically. It seems as if Gaga sings a million reasons almost a million times in the verses (okay, not really, but she does sing those words a lot). She introduces variations of the pattern after doing two repetitions. This keeps the listener's ears from getting fatigued. The melody sings in a rhythmic way—very choppy with short fast notes.

When the chorus hits, you definitely know you are in the chorus because the melody soars. The chorus melody features a lot of melodic variation. The chorus notes stretch, they are longer and held out. Then, halfway through the chorus, Lady Gaga uses interval jumps. This gives more contrast and keeps your attention, doesn't it? It keeps mine!

She always puts rhymes on the repeated end chorus melody lines to seal the deal (pray/way/stay, better/leather).

I suggest you study this song as a master class in using the melodic principles I've spelled out in this book.

Make Your Song Matter: Songs Can Make the Listener Listen and Feel Something or Change Their Lives

Every culture and country in the world has its own music and songs. Why? Because we have a universal human need to communicate and connect emotionally with each other through music.

I'll bet you can think of more than one song that evokes the same emotion in you as the first time you heard it. Every time it plays, that song takes you back to another time and place and that certain feeling. Or, you've probably heard a song or three that perfectly articulate how you feel about something or someone that you've never been able to put into words.

I believe words and music together have the power to change people's lives. I can't tell you how many times someone has come up to me after a show and said that a song I had on the radio got them through the hardest times in their lives—a break-up, a sick loved one, a divorce. Songs have the power to heal and offer hope.

Throughout Mastering Melody Writing, we've been discussing a number of technical aspects of melody, but I want to remind you that fundamentally, beyond all intellectual analysis, melodies move people emotionally. Music gets people to feel something. That is why we listen to it!

You often know whether a song is happy or sad by the melody alone. Listen to a few songs in a language you don't understand and I bet you can tell, most of the time, what emotion that song is conveying.

Developing Your Auralect vs. Your Intellect

One of the most frequent questions I get from students is, "How do you know which notes to choose when writing a melody?" It's a fair question for sure, but comes from a place of desiring to intellectually understand an instinctual process.

In reality, when writing a song, I hear the notes and sing them. Or, I play them on an instrument. My voice is following my ear, to be more specific, it follows the instincts of my ear.

I've always thought of composing as remembering a melody that has never been written. That's as close as I've ever come to describing that feeling of instinctual composition.

Intellectually, we can learn techniques like Line+. It's crucial to expand our mental understanding of melody. However, to take melody writing to the next level of composition, you must turn off your intellect and trust what I call your Auralect.

In Auralect moments, we are not intellectually thinking about melody, we are hearing it. We are following where the ear takes us.

How do we develop our Auralect?

Two things have been constants for me over the years: the Talk/Sing Exercise and developing my Auralect by memorizing a lot of melodies. I'm always singing melodies. When I hear a song in an elevator, I sing my own melodies above the tracks. If I'm walking around, I am humming to myself—sometimes a little too loudly for passersby!

The Beatles wrote some of the greatest melodies in recorded music. However, they started out as a cover band! The Beatles played eight hours a night in Hamburg during their formative years. To play for eight long hours, they had to know a lot of tunes. So, they didn't just play the latest popular rock-n-roll songs, they also learned Broadway tunes, Irish pub songs, and any style of music they could get their hands on. It's a big reason why their music is so universally accepted around the world.

The good thing is you and I don't have to play eight days a week. (See what I did there?) We can practice the Talk/Sing Exercise or hum melodies along with the radio or tv. Incorporating these types of creative activities as regular practice leads to more instinctual melodies. You can quickly develop your Auralect with a little practice.

My Wish for You

All of the tools and understandings I have presented in Mastering Melody Writing are in service of helping you write songs that engage and move your listeners. A well-written and effective song can make the listener cry, laugh, remember, feel happy or nostalgic, dance, or even change their minds about something.

Listen to a song like “I Hope You Dance,” co-written by my friend Tia Sellers. You can feel the emotion, even beyond the lyrics. Or, listen to “Live Like You Were Dyin’,” another song of the year, and experience the emotion conveyed through both the lyrics and the melody.

Successful songwriting communicates emotion through the notes, rhythms, patterns, repetitions, and arc. I hope Mastering Melody Writing helps you capture and communicate authentic and moving emotions in your own songs. The world needs music more than ever now. Your songs can become a part of this living tradition that creates memories, evokes emotions, and touches people all over the world as you master the art and skill of melody writing.

Afterword

We all come to songwriting from different paths with a wide array of motivations and goals.

Some of us experience life-altering heartbreak or trauma and want to pour our emotions into song.

Some just like the challenge and fun of staring at a blank sheet of paper and seeing what it can become.

Some want to become pros, or perhaps, have a well-known artist sing a song we've written.

It's also satisfying to get better at crafting a well-written song.

For me, it has been a combination of all these things and more. Each day and each new song remains a mystery waiting to reveal itself.

But, I warn you, to be a songwriter brings with it highs and lows. It can be lonely when friends or family don't understand your obsession. That's why it's important to find other like-minded creative souls who can help support you on your journey. It's a big reason Marty Dodson and I started SongTown and why so many of our members around the world think of each other as family. It's been said that 95% of the art in the world is created by 5% of the population.

That makes us songwriters a unique breed!

I'd like to leave you with a story I've told at all of my live concerts over the last 10 years…

When I first announced to my friends in New York City that I was going to Nashville to become a songwriter, I'm sure they were all surprised. It's a big leap to pack up and move to a new town with only a dream and a prayer. But, I was determined.

The week I was scheduled to move, several friends threw a big "going away" party at a Manhattan restaurant. Well, it wasn't exactly a going away party. It was more like an intervention! They tried to reason with me and most of them made great points: I had a good job already; I had friends I could count on; and, no one in Nashville was making plans to record my songs at that time. All perfectly sane reasons from caring friends. But, I forged on to Nashville.

I was fortunate. I got a publishing deal with EMI music. Then, I was unfortunate and lost that deal! And so, it went for seven years like that. I wrote daily. I stayed focused on my goal of becoming the best songwriter I could be. I sharpened my skills, each day desiring to write better than the day before.

Every few months I would get phone calls from well-meaning friends asking me what on earth I was doing. Hadn't I had enough already? I could always move back to New York and work at writing music for commercials again. There was good money in it, etc. I'll admit there were many times I wondered if I was doing the right thing. But, I persisted and when I finally wrote my first hit song "Beautiful Mess"…well, the week it went number one, I remember listening to many voicemails on my phone. They all started out the same way: "We knew you would make it!"

Dream On! Write On!

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Glossary

Clay’s Songwriting Terms

Arc

The musical and emotional story arc of a song. The rise and fall of melodic intensity over the course of an entire song.

Auralect

The ability to follow your ear while composing; hearing where the melody wants to take you. This involves the suspension of intellect and trusting inner instincts.

A state of mind where we are not intellectually thinking about melody, we are hearing it.

Conversational Verse Melody

A verse melody with a small note range of two to four notes. Even though it is sung, it gives the illusion of simply talking to the listener. A great device for setting up a big emotional chorus.

Hooky

In songwriter lingo, the part of a song that causes the human ear (and brain) to get “caught” by certain melody patterns and repetitions, like a fish biting down on a hook.

Hotspot

A naturally occurring consequence of melody. A part of a melodic line that draws the listener in like a moth to a flame.

Inspired Listening

Listening to music without judgment while focusing on elements that inspire, and which can be incorporated into your own writing. It promotes growth of the writer. It is the opposite of Reactive Listening, which revolves around judgment and opinions. (This simply reinforces what you think you already know.)

Line+, Line+3, etc.

A system of melodic pattern writing that makes songs hookier and grabs the listener’s attention. A way of understanding melody phrases by breaking them down into smaller parts containing fluid lines and rhythmic patterns. Common Variations are Line+3, 3+Line, and Line+2.

The PRA Method

An approach to melody composition utilizing three core elements of songwriting —pattern, repetition, and arc.

Pro Feedback

A faster way to improve writing by seeking critiques on your songs from pro writers who have achieved success in their field. Organizations like SongTown.com match aspiring writers with pros for song feedback.

Repeated Interval Jumps

Jumping back and forth between two notes that are separated by more than a whole step. A technique used in all genres.

Shape Shifting

When a melodic pattern is repeated higher or lower in the scale. In other words, take a melodic shape and move the entire shape higher or lower on the scale. The relationship between the notes usually stays the same, but the pattern starts on a different note, perhaps a few notes lower or higher than the first pattern.

Spitballing

The technique of improvising vocal melodies without the aide of forethought or words.

The Talk/Sing Method

A method of practicing that develops quick reflexes for hearing words and emotion, and then turning them into melody. It involves hearing words spoken in a conversation and immediately singing them without forethought.

Top-liner

Top-liners work with a track-person by adding melody and lyrics on top of the musical track.

Track Guy/Girl/Person

Someone who creates music tracks or a groove under the lyrics and melody of a song using a combination of computer, loops, and live instruments.

Word Painting

A device of imitating the emotion, action, or natural sounds as described in the lyrical text. It’s the art of bringing a word to life by mirroring its meaning with music and/or melody.

Would You Do Us A Favor?

THANK YOU FOR BUYING OUR BOOK! We're convinced that following the tips in the book and learning from our (many) mistakes can help you become a better melody writer.

We have a small favor to ask. Would you mind taking a minute to write a blurb on Amazon, or wherever you purchased this book? We check all of our reviews and we love to get feedback. That's one of the joys of our work – knowing that we are helping people.

Also, if you have any friends or family that might enjoy and benefit from this book, spread the love and lend it to them!

Thanks again! We hope to hear from you, and we wish you the best!

Clay and Bill

P.S. If you want to learn more about songwriting, check out www.SongTown.com. We provide community, coaching and connection for songwriters all over the planet.